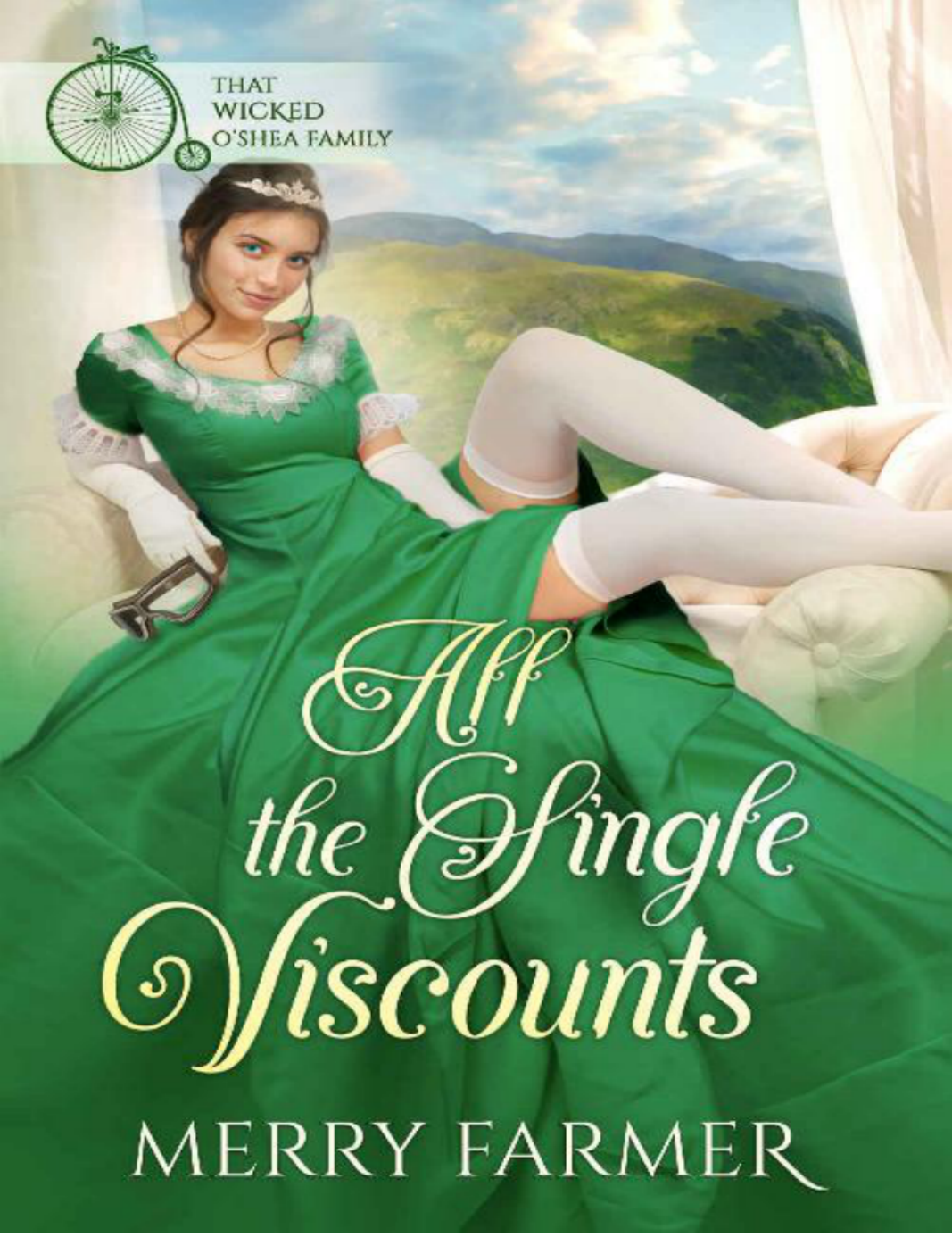

THAT
WICKED
O'SHEA FAMILY
All the Single Viscounts
MERRY FARMER

All the Single Viscounts

Merry Farmer

ALL THE SINGLE VISCOUNTS

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Chapter 1

Near Ballymena, Ireland – June, 1889

Ireland had seemed like a brilliant idea was the prospect was first proposed. Its lush, green hills and deep feeling of history and importance had thrilled Miss Erica Joyce when her father announced that the church was sending him there to tend a small flock just outside of the town of Ballymena. Right from the start, Erica's head had been filled with dreams of adventure and excitement, new vistas and new friends. She'd packed all of her worldly belongings into a single trunk and said all of her goodbyes, promising to write to the friends she was leaving behind with a happy heart. She was used to writing multiple letters a week, after all, ever since gaining an American pen-friend—Miss Ellen Garrett of Haskell, Wyoming—through an acquaintance of her aunt's who had befriended Ellen's sister, Lenore. Erica had written numerous letters to Ellen in the last several weeks, speculating all about the romantic life she was about to have in Ireland, and had mailed them with a squeal of anticipation every time.

The reality of her new life in Ireland was as different from what she'd imagined as umbrellas were to pigs.

"And as the Bible tells us," her father droned on, a half hour into his interminable sermon, "it is our place to be meek and humble in the eyes of the Lord. For as the gospel says, 'Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth'. This exhortation applies especially to the fairer sex, as meekness and amiability is their natural state."

Erica fought with everything she had not to roll her eyes. It was not that she didn't love her father. Papa had taken exceptional care of her and raised her entirely on his own after her mother's passing when she was but five. She had never wanted for anything, had always been clothed modestly, fed simply, and had never been cold or damp or without a roof over her head. Her father had provided for her education and lavished her with the sort of stilted affection one would expect from an unimaginative man of the cloth. And Ireland was very lovely to look at in the end. But Erica wanted more.

"For as woman was created from a man's rib, so a man should love her as though she were a part of himself," her father went on. He glanced to her with a carefully affectionate smile before continuing with, "What would our lives be without a woman's gentling, domestic

influence?"

Erica schooled her expression into a mild smile, pretending as much as she could that she was listening to her father and that she shared his opinions. The trouble was, she did not. She'd tried to believe that women should be soft and domestic at all times. She'd fought against the wellspring of mischief within her, wishing to please her father above all else, but the older she grew, the harder it was to fight what felt like a natural inclination within her. She craved adventure and experience. The letters she received from Ellen were always filled with heart-stopping gossip about the bold and brave ladies of the American West, including more than a few tales of the soiled doves that resided in a brothel right in the center of the town of Haskell, an establishment known as Bonnie's Place. Ellen was a font of forbidden knowledge, and she wasn't afraid to share any of it with Erica.

"Tranquility in one's home is of paramount importance," her father droned on, believing what he said a bit too much, "and it is a woman's place to provide that tranquility."

As he took a breath to go on, a loud thump and crack sounded outside of the small church, followed by the sound of men cursing. Erica was one of the handful of people attending the sermon who snorted and had to hide her laugh behind her hand. The commotion outside continued, though at a lower volume after that.

Her father glanced to one of the leaded-glass windows with a frown, then cleared his throat and went on. "When tranquility of the home has been achieved, tranquility of the mind is possible. And with a tranquil mind, one can more deeply serve the Lord. And so, the responsibility for our higher communion with the divine is most especially the provenance of the fairer sex."

With the disruption over, the congregation focused on the service once again. Erica, however, couldn't have given her father her full attention if her life depended on it, and for more reasons than whatever had caused the trouble outside. She'd barely been able to pay attention to anything since discovering the letter her father had forgotten to mention had been waiting for her at the post office in Ballymena until just that morning. It was postmarked from Wyoming, and Erica hadn't had time to read it before she was called upon to help her father ready the church for that morning's service. She'd tucked the missive into her Bible just before the sermon began, and as her father continued to preach about how women should be loving, docile creatures, she opened her Bible to where the letter was pressed between its pages and read.

"*Dear Erica,*" it began in Ellen's extravagant, loopy handwriting. "*You will never guess what has happened! Mrs. Corva Haskell, who is*

married to Mr. Franklin Haskell, you will remember, and is one of the most prominent ladies in town, has invited Mrs. Molly Miniver to speak at a meeting of the Ladies' Aid Society! Molly Miniver!!! You know she is a notorious madam from Carson City, Nevada who has used the profits of her brothel to fund various charitable organizations, including those that support the rights of Indians. Everyone expects her to be modest and upright, since she has become so prominent and respected, but she cusses like a sailor and speaks as openly about what transpires in her brothel as most women do about church picnics!!! I managed to acquire a menu of services from her establishment—which I have copied down and am including for your edification—and when I asked her what some of the things were, SHE TOLD ME!!!! And now I shall tell you."

Erica buzzed with curiosity as she pretended to turn a page in her Bible in order to shuffle to the second page of Ellen's letter so that she could discover the menu in question. It was thoroughly annotated, and as Erica read Ellen's explanation of things, her face heated and her heart began to race.

"Modesty and an obedient heart are key," her father said with particular emphasis.

Erica almost didn't hear him. She wouldn't have dragged her attention away from Ellen's annotations at all, but for the loud creak and groan and continued cussing that sounded outside once again. The sermon was interrupted entirely, and more than a few people in the congregation gasped or murmured to their neighbors.

One young man leapt out of his seat entirely and rushed to tilt open one of the windows. "Blimey!" he exclaimed, his eyes going wide. "Would you look at that."

A few others got up to have a look, but Erica's father stopped them with, "I beg your pardon, the sermon is not over yet." The stern frown he fixed them with was enough to convince the young men to slink back to their seats, though the window remained partially open. "Erica, my dear." Her father turned to her, bristling with impatience. "Would you be so kind as to go outside and inform whoever is causing such a disturbance that they are interfering with God's work?"

Erica leapt to her feet, clutching her Bible to her chest. "Yes, Papa," she said, unable to keep the smile off her face. Her father had given her leave to abandon the dry sermon, and she couldn't have been happier.

"Thank you, my dear," her father said as Erica rushed to the doors at the back of the church. "Though I know it is not seemly to brag, I have been blessed with a perfect example of womanhood in the person of my darling daughter."

Heat infused Erica's face once more as she sped out into the balmy morning. As flattering as it was that her father thought so highly of

her, it twisted Erica's gut with guilt and worry. She was not half as perfect as her father believed her to be, and as much as she cared for him, his expectations could only lead to disappointment when he discovered she was merely human. She dreaded the day when her father's shining image of her was tarnished, but it felt as though that time were drawing closer with every thrill Ellen's letters gave her, every burst of curiosity at the wicked explanation of things they contained, and at the—

Erica's thoughts derailed in an instant when she rounded the corner of the church, glanced across the sloping hill and field beside the property, and saw the dazzlingly handsome form of Lord Caelian O'Shea, Viscount Dervock, standing beside a great, spreading flying machine that seemed to be painted to resemble a dragon. She'd met the beautiful, charming viscount a few weeks prior, when the kite she was flying crashed near the home of Lord Dervock's cousin, Lady Shannon, and her new husband, Lord Colin Crenshaw, Earl of Stamford. That first meeting had been lovely, and Erica had felt a spark of attraction from the moment her eyes met those of Lord Dervock. She'd felt that spark at every chance meeting the two of them had had since then, and when Lord Dervock pivoted away from his flying machine, saw her standing there, and smiled, Erica thought Ireland might just be worth the trouble after all.

THINGS WERE NOT GOING to plan. From the moment Caelian arrived at the field beside the modest church where Rev. Joyce led his small congregation, it had been one minor mishap after another.

"Be careful with the left side," he warned his cousin Avery as they attempted to move the dragon off of the cart Benedict had loaned them to transport the flying machine from the barn on Benedict's property to the field. "It's dipping down too much. Careful, careful!"

Avery was being careful, but that didn't stop the dragon from thunking to the ground unceremoniously, and from the tailgate of the wagon snapping. At least the glider wasn't damaged, though from the amount of swearing that he, Benedict, and Avery did—and right beside a church while a service was taking place at that—one might have thought it had been.

"Sorry, Caelian," Avery called from the end of the left wing as the three men maneuvered the craft so that they could push it up to the top of the hill. "Nothing seems to be worse for wear."

"Thank God," Caelian said. He figured it was an appropriate sentiment, since they were testing the glider beside the church. He would have looked for a different spot for the experimental run, but the slope of the hill beside the church was just right for the test flight he had in mind. "We should be able to push the dragon up to the top

of the hill with a little effort," he said, climbing onto the bicycle that had been built into the center of the craft to propel it. "If the wind stays right, I'm certain we can keep her aloft for at least thirty seconds. We might even break a record or two."

His heart soared with the possibility. Ever since he'd stumbled across a club of men interested in aeronautics and the advancement of flight while at university, Caelian had been determined to become the first man to crack the remaining mysteries of the skies. So much was being discovered and tested by men in several countries. Every day some new hypothesis was advanced about what enabled something heavier than air to sail through the skies. Caelian felt as though they were all agonizingly close to figuring it out, and he wanted to remain right at the forefront of the whole thing.

Which, of course, meant testing his own theories and attempting to construct the perfect flying machine. His dragon was a good start, but he knew there were improvements that needed to be made. Every test flight he performed brought him one step closer to being that first man to sustain flight.

"Are you certain this is perfectly safe?" Avery asked as they muscled the dragon up the hill. "It looked fine from down there, but the higher we climb this hill, the more worried I am for you."

"The aerodynamics that I've built into the dragon are solid," Caelian replied, pedaling the bicycle with as much strength as he could muster. He'd built his strength up quite a bit since beginning his trials with the dragon and previous flying machines. "If all goes according to my calculations, I should be able to gain the speed needed to create lift by sailing down this hill."

"And if the whole thing goes horribly wrong," Benedict added in a sly voice, panting as he pushed the dragon's right wing, "then he'll crash in the tall grass at the end of that field and walk away without a scratch."

"No one is going to crash," Caelian told him with a frown.

In fact, crashing was a very real possibility. There had been far more disasters than successes with the early models of gliders and the like that his acquaintances and colleagues had put together. A handful of men had died after pushing their machines to the limit and testing them from too high off the ground. Benedict wasn't wrong in his assessment that the field at the end of the hill would cushion him, should the worst happen. That was precisely the reason Caelian had chosen that hill for his test flight.

That and the fact that his rival, one Mr. Rory Feeney, had already taken up the very best hill, on a vista near the ocean a few miles north, for his own experimental flight that morning.

"If anyone is going to crash, I hope it's Feeney," he said almost to

himself as they reached the summit of the hill. He climbed off of the bicycle seat and proceeded to help Avery and Benedict turn the dragon to face in the right direction.

"Still caught up in that rivalry, are you?" Avery asked with a bright smile.

Caelian grinned in return. "Feeney is as close to cracking the code as I am," he said. "His glider is of a different design, but it's just as viable as the dragon here. Which is why I have to work twice as hard to perfect my design. I don't want a rascal like that beating me to my place in the history books."

"What makes Feeney's glider any different than yours?" Benedict asked.

Caelian was prevented from answering the question immediately as the dragon tipped to the side again. There was a groan of wood rubbing against wood, then a crack as something on the craft snapped. Benedict swore loudly, and Caelian echoed his expletives. He scrambled around the craft to see what had broken. When he found a joint that had broken apart, he swore again.

"You can fix that, can't you?" Benedict asked sheepishly.

"I can," Caelian sighed, pushing his fingers through his hair. "But every time something breaks, it puts me one step further away from getting things to work."

Benedict and Avery hummed in agreement, and Avery jogged back to the wagon to fetch the toolbox while Caelian made a few initial adjustments for the repair.

Once Avery brought him the tools, Caelian answered Benedict's original question as he worked. "Feeney's glider is modeled after the gull-winged craft that John J. Montgomery successfully flew for a few meters in California a few years ago," he said. "It's a strong design, but I am not convinced it's the best model. I happen to think that straighter wings are the better way to go." He smoothed his hand along the stretched canvas that made up his dragon's wings. "Anything that provides balance and stability during flight is the—"

His words and his thoughts stopped cold as he glanced down the hill only to find Miss Erica Joyce smiling up at him. Caelian's heart immediately thundered against his ribs, as though he were already in midflight. Miss Joyce was the loveliest woman he'd ever had the pleasure of being introduced to in his entire life. Her dark hair was a fine contrast to her petal-pale skin. Her eyes were expressive and filled with interest as she headed up the hill toward their group. Her lips were full and gave Caelian ideas that he most definitely should not have had. He might have been an O'Shea, but he wasn't about to go around causing the sort of trouble his family was known to cause.

Well, he wasn't going to cause any trouble other than attempting

to create a flying machine and disturbing church services while doing it.

"Oh dear," Avery said in a teasing voice, straightening from where he'd been tightening a bolt that had come loose. "Are we going to test the flying machine this morning or is someone soaring in an entirely different fashion now?"

"I've never known him to look at a woman with such a moony expression," Benedict said from the other side of the wing where Caelian stood. "This must be the intriguing Miss Jewel that Colleen told me about."

"You've heard about her?" Avery asked, moving to stand next to Benedict. The two of them crossed their arms and leaned back a bit, as though they were about to observe a particularly interesting play.

Benedict hummed in the affirmative. "Colleen and her sisters enjoyed tea at our house the other day, and Miss Joyce and Caelian were all they could talk about." He lowered his voice as Miss Joyce came within hearing distance to say, "Apparently, the ladies are wagering this could become something to watch."

"The ladies are seldom wrong," Avery said in a mock serious voice.

Caelian was aware that his cousin and friend were poking fun at him, but he couldn't bring himself to care. Any morning where he met Miss Joyce was a good morning, and it was made even better by the way she glanced at the dragon with interest in her eyes.

"Good morning, Miss Joyce," Caelian greeted her with a smile. His gaze dropped momentarily to the Bible she carried, and Caelian reminded himself to be respectful and reserved with Miss Joyce.

"Good morning, Lord Dervock," the beautiful woman greeted him in return.

"Please call me Caelian," he appealed to her. "I know I should, but I do not really have much interest in titles and correct form of address."

Miss Joyce's smile brightened, even though she said, "You know I cannot break with protocol, my lord." She brushed immediately on without giving Caelian a chance to protest by saying, "Is this the magnificent flying machine I've heard so much about?"

"It is," Caelian replied, placing a hand affectionately on his dragon's wing. "We were just about to take her for a test flight. Do you want to watch?" He asked the question before pausing to consider whether Miss Joyce were truly interested or what the purpose of her appearance might have been. It was Sunday, and she was the daughter of a clergyman, after all. She might not approve of him flying instead of attending church. For all he knew, she might not have approved of flying machines at all.

Fortunately, he needn't have worried about any of that, because

excitement lit the woman's eyes, pink flooded her cheeks, and she said, "I would absolutely love to watch you fly."

Chapter 2

Erica caught the way Caelian's gaze dropped to the Bible that she clutched against her stomach, and her heart sank a little. She didn't want to give the fine, young viscount the impression that she was too prim and proper to make his acquaintance, or to call him by his given name, as he'd requested her to do. That and the way he smiled at her as he asked whether she would like to see a demonstration of his flying machine had Erica's heart thumping in her chest and every wicked thing Ellen had written to her about coming to the forefront of her mind.

"How does your flying machine work, Caelian?" she asked after a long silence, in which Caelian merely watched her, smiling and caught up in his own thoughts.

At her question, Caelian seemed to shake himself out of his thoughts, and his smile broadened. "In theory, the construction of the dragon will give it enough lift to sail through the air, even while manned, and to travel a long distance."

Erica blinked. "The dragon?"

Again, Caelian's gaze dropped to her Bible, and his cheeks pinked a little as he said, "I hope you do not find the name offensive. It was a whimsical choice on my part, as I've always been rather fond of tales of knights and dragons and daring deeds."

Erica's heart sang in her chest, and it was suddenly difficult to breathe. "I think that's wonderful," she said, her eyes fixed on Caelian's charming, green ones. She'd learned through careful inquiry over the last few weeks that she and her father had been in Ireland that Caelian was part of the notorious O'Shea family. They were apparently a pack of scandalous trouble-makers, all of whom had red hair in varying degrees. Caelian had a bit of that coloring, but his hair was a more subdued auburn, and as far as she'd been able to tell, he wasn't nearly as wicked as the rest of his clan.

Which was a bit of a shame.

"Why don't you take to your dragon and show Miss Joyce how she flies instead of standing there like a moon-eyed fool?" a taller, dark-haired man said from where he stood off to the side with another

gentlemen—who, judging by his hair and features, was another O'Shea.

Caelian seemed to shake himself again. "Yes, yes, of course." He smiled cheerily at Erica, then turned to duck under the wing of his dragon, heading toward what appeared to be a bicycle built into the center of the thing. "This is still a prototype design of what could be a much more complex flying machine," he explained as he climbed over a small railing that made up part of the main body of the craft. "The bicycle is to provide forward propulsion. I am convinced there is a better means of providing that, but at the moment, this is the best I could do."

"And how does it get off the ground?" Erica asked, sending a brief, sideways glance to the two gentlemen who were watching. She hugged her Bible again self-consciously, unwilling to let the fact that she was being observed interfere with the inroads she was certain she was making in befriending Caelian.

"Ah, that's the problem," Caelian said as he settled on the bicycle seat. "That's exactly the problem that everyone in this race to fly is caught up in at the moment. How can something quite heavy take on the qualities of something lighter than air?"

"How can it indeed?" Erica took a step closer to the dragon.

"Have a care, my lady," the red-haired gentlemen said, moving forward and holding out a hand. "You could be struck by the wing when he moves forward."

"Oh." Erica's face heated over her mistake, and she took a step back. "Thank you, sir."

"Avery O'Shea, Lord Carnlough," he introduced himself with a polite nod.

"Lord Boleran," the other man introduced himself much more formally.

"Pleased to meet you," Erica said, taking a step back. She turned her attention immediately back to Caelian, who had found his seat on the bicycle and was tugging on a few lines and some sort of lever. She only just noticed the two gentlemen murmur something to each other while grinning from her to Caelian. Perhaps she should have felt self-conscious about it, but then again, if the two men took it upon themselves to advance her acquaintance with Caelian, Erica didn't mind at all.

"Ready?" Caelian called out from the center of the dragon. He unhooked a pair of wide, round goggles from the bicycle's handlebars and put them on.

"Ready," Erica answered. She found the goggles rather fetching and unusual, and smiled with excitement.

"Here we go," Caelian said with a triumphant shout, then pedaled

the bicycle forward.

Erica held her breath and watched. Caelian pedaled down the slope of the hill…and pedaled…and pedaled. The wings of the dragon moved a bit and the contraption creaked, but that was all that happened. Her heart went from elation to disappointment and sympathy as Caelian and his flying machine rolled to a stop at the bottom of the hill, not far from where the grass grew thicker and was dotted with wildflowers.

"Bugger," Lord Carnlough said, then quickly followed that with, "I do beg your pardon, Miss Joyce."

"Not at all," Erica smiled, then joined the two gentlemen in running down the hill and across the field until they reached Caelian and the dragon.

Caelian was clearly unhappy with his failed flight. "Bloody, fucking—"

Erica gasped at the expletive, and when he heard the sound, Caelian's body went rigid, and he whipped around to find her standing there.

"Miss Joyce, I'm so terribly sorry," he said, eyes wide with alarm.

"I've heard much worse," she told him with a smile that she hoped would set him at ease. In fact, she and Ellen had taken to cursing as wickedly as they could in their letters, in imitation of how Ellen said the soiled doves in Wyoming spoke to each other and just because they could.

"Still, it was unforgivable of me to speak so crudely in front of a lady like yourself," Caelian apologized. Again, his gaze dropped to the Bible that she still held.

Erica would have tossed the thing away…except her letter was inside, and she still had at least a degree of respect for the holy book and all it signified.

She was on the verge of telling Caelian he needn't worry when a newcomer to the scene strode up to the dragon, his hands in the pockets of his trousers, his bowler hat set at a jaunty angle, and said, "Oh, dear. It looks as though you've failed once again, Dervock."

Caelian's reaction to the man—Lord Boleran and Lord Carnlough's reactions too—was immediate and pointed. All three men stood straighter, puffed their chests out, and glared indignantly at the newcomer. It didn't take any sort of exceptional wit for Erica to instantly determine that the man was some sort of rival.

"Feeney," Caelian greeted the man with a curt nod. "Spying on the competition, are we?"

"Competition?" Feeney asked, turning this way and that with a confused look. "I see no competition here."

"He's come to steal your design secrets, no doubt," Lord Boleran

said, narrowing his eyes at the man.

Mr. Feeney shrugged. “I see no secrets worth stealing. All I see is a stack of kindling and bedsheets that has failed to fulfill its purpose. Now, if I had caught Dervock here walking down by the beach earlier this morning, that would have been spying.”

“Like hell it—” Lord Boleran began, but stopped himself abruptly with a glance to Erica. “I beg your pardon, Miss Joyce.”

Mr. Feeney’s brow inched up, and he turned an assessing gaze on Erica. He was a handsome man, Erica would give him that much. He had the dark hair and blue eyes of a certain segment of the Irish, and a strong jaw and pleasing features to go with it. He was tall, with broad shoulders and a trim waist. Erica pegged him at once as the sort of man who women threw themselves at, and Mr. Feeney as the sort who knew it and perhaps took advantage of it. But in spite of the clear rivalry between Mr. Feeney and Caelian, she didn’t sense any deeper resentment. The two men were at odds, but the didn’t hate each other.

“And how was your test flight this morning?” Caelian asked, schooling his expression to neutrality and behaving like an interested colleague rather than a goading antagonist. Erica rather admired him for his forbearance.

Of course, that forbearance didn’t last when Mr. Feeney grinned at Erica again and said, “It was splendid, but not half as splendid or as uplifting as the joy of meeting a beautiful woman.”

Caelian scowled.

Erica couldn’t help but laugh. “You are a charmer, Mr. Feeney. But I think you will find that I do not charm as easily as all that.”

“Do you hear that, Dervock?” Mr. Feeney laughed. “You have your work cut out for you with this fine lady.”

Caelian huffed impatiently. “I will not have you insult Miss Joyce in such a way. Her father is the new vicar of St. Matthew’s church.” He gestured to the small church building.

“I am terribly sorry, Miss Joyce,” Mr. Feeney said with sudden gravity, bowing respectfully to her.

Erica wanted to sigh, and perhaps roll her eyes. Just because her father had chosen a life in service to the Lord didn’t mean she was a missish stick-in-the-mud. She dearly wished that people would stop treating her as such.

Unfortunately, Mr. Feeney’s apology and subsequent glance at the church drew Erica’s attention to the fact that the Sunday service had ended and her father’s congregation was leaving the building. Quite a few of them glanced in the direction of their group and the dragon. Erica regretted that the conversation and her fun would inevitably come to an end, so she attempted to prolong it.

“And how far was your craft able to fly this morning, Mr. Feeney?”

she asked with a saucy tilt of her chin.

Mr. Feeney smiled as though he liked the question. He turned to Caelian to answer, “A damn sight farther than this one, I can say that for certain.”

Erica loved the fact that he’d cursed in front of her without apologizing.

Caelian clearly didn’t. “I will believe it when I see it, Feeney. As far as I’ve been able to tell, you are far better at boasting and throwing your money around as though it were seeds you were scattering in a field than actually getting that gull of yours into the air.”

Erica’s brow inched up at the mention of money. Was Mr. Feeney wealthy somehow?

“I haven’t seen much of a flight from your dragon,” Mr. Feeney fired back at Caelian. “So perhaps the pot shouldn’t go calling the kettle black.”

“Dervock has nothing to be ashamed of,” Lord Carnlough defended him. “He’s made some astounding advances in the last few months.”

“I’d like to see them,” Mr. Feeney laughed.

Erica had the impression he would have gone on, had her father not stormed up to the group, a scowl marring his otherwise gentle face, his hands balled into fists.

“What is the meaning of this disturbance, gentlemen?” he demanded, glaring at each of the men in turn. “And Erica, why are you conversing with these men without any sort of chaperonage instead of telling them to be quiet, as I asked you to do?”

“I am sorry, Papa.” Erica lowered her head in embarrassment and clutched her Bible even tighter to her stomach—which was feeling a bit sick over the way her father scolded her in front of Caelian and the others.

“Never mind,” her father said with a sigh. “It is not in a woman’s nature to be forward enough to scold grown men for making noise like children.”

Erica’s face heated even more. She peeked to Caelian, drowning in mortification.

For his part, Caelian and the other gentlemen looked astounded at being addressed the way her father had spoken to them. Astounded and a bit amused.

“I beg your pardon, Rev. Joyce,” Lord Boleran told her father with more formality than Erica had ever seen anyone address him. “My wife’s cousin, Lord Caelian O’Shea, Viscount Dervock, and his cousin, Lord Avery O’Shea, Earl of Carnlough, took the liberty of borrowing your hill this morning to test Lord Dervock’s flying machine.” He paused for only a moment before going on with, “Allow me to introduce myself. Lord Benedict Keenan, Marquess of Boleran.”

Erica nearly snorted in her effort not to laugh. Apparently, the Irish aristocracy was just as likely to use their titles and ranking as a means of intimidating people as the English were.

"Oh," her father said, blinking from one man to another. His jaw worked soundlessly for a moment, as though he were trying to decide what he should do about the passel of noblemen standing before him. Finally, his gaze settled on Mr. Feeney. "And you are?"

"Rory Feeney." Mr. Feeney held out his hand. "Just a mister."

"And owner of the largest cannery in northern Ireland," Lord Boleran added in a low voice.

Erica's urge to giggle grew even harder to resist. She cleared her throat and stepped in with, "Gentlemen, may I introduce my father, Rev. Silas Joyce."

It was, perhaps, the most awkward moment of Erica's life. Her father shook each man's hand gingerly, as if battling between his obvious disapproval of the way they had disrupted his service, but also with the respect that he had for the upper classes. It was highly unlikely that her father would do anything to express outward disapproval of any gentleman, so he turned his disquiet in the only direction it could go.

"My dear, it is entirely inappropriate for you to be associating with these gentlemen," he scolded her. "I would not have sent you out to see about the disturbance if I had known." He turned back to the gentlemen and stood a bit taller. "It is a woman's duty to be meek and mild," he said, as though continuing his earlier sermon. "Women are the flowers of humanity, and as such they should not be ruffled by the rough breeze of male concerns."

"Is that so?" Lord Carnlough said, barely containing a grin.

"He has not met my wife, apparently," Lord Boleran said, barely audible.

Erica's father went on. "I am proud of the fact that my daughter is the kindest, gentlest, most obedient soul you will ever find. She is modest in her appearance and in her thoughts. She keeps her duty to her family and her god at the forefront of her mind at all times. She has not a single blemish on her soul. I am excessively proud of her." He paused, glanced at Erica wistfully, then added, "And sometimes I worry about her."

Erica blushed so hard that she thought her entire head might burst into flames. Her father's assessment of her was flattering and heartwarming. It was also completely and utterly wrong. She knew it, and she sincerely hoped that, deep down, her father knew it as well and wouldn't hold her to his impossible standards forever. Perhaps that was why he worried.

Unfortunately, Caelian seemed to believe her father's statements

about her, incorrect as they were. He smiled at her with the sort of distant reserve that a man saved for his mother or other sainted female relatives. That wasn't at all the sort of emotion Erica wanted to see in him. She wanted the sort of jolly affection Ellen had written about as she described the various ladies and gentlemen of Haskell. She wanted the warm familiarity of Ellen's reports about the soiled doves of Bonnie's Place. And yes, she was not too proud to admit that she wanted to know what it felt like to kiss a man and to be handled by him in a scandalous way. It was as far from the picture her father had painted of her as could be, and Erica feared Caelian would walk away from the meeting with the wrong idea.

"I have been most impressed with your daughter thus far," Caelian told her father with a friendly nod. "I should like to continue our acquaintance."

Joy blossomed in Erica's heart, and she smiled at Caelian. She opened her mouth to tell him she would like that as well, but her father cut her off.

"No, my lord, I do not think that would be appropriate," he said. "My daughter is an innocent, you see, and should not associate with strange men."

"Lord Dervock is quite strange," Mr. Feeney added with a teasing wink.

Lord Boleran and Lord Carnlough glared at him as though he were not helping matters, but Caelian hardly seemed to notice.

"I can vouch for my cousin's character," Lord Carnlough said with a thoughtful look in his eyes. "He is the most humble and agreeable of our family, and once he chooses a wife, I am certain they will have a respectable place in Ballymena society."

Erica's face heated once again, and she was tempted to hide it behind her Bible. Lord Carnlough couldn't have been more obvious in the way he informed her father that Caelian was a single viscount, likely in search of a wife.

"I see," her father said with a sedate nod that was at odds with the look of inspiration in his eyes. A moment later, however, he shook his head, and that spark of curiosity died. "Thank you for the introduction, my lords, Mr. Feeney," he said, then turned to Erica. "My dear, it is time to say goodbye so that we may tend to the flock." He glanced over his shoulder at where their parishioners had gathered to watch the conversation. "Come along."

"Yes, Papa," Erica said with a wistful sigh, then turned to follow her father back to the churchyard.

She couldn't leave it at that, though. They'd traveled only a few yards before Erica stopped and turned back.

"I forgot one thing, Papa," she said in a hurry, then dashed back to

where Caelian had turned his attention to his flying machine. He glanced up in surprise as she marched right up to him and said, “I would like to continue our acquaintance, no matter what my father says. He has not painted an accurate representation of my character just now.”

“Oh.” Caelian’s brow flew up. “Alright, then. I will see what I can do.”

His smile was encouraging, and it gave Erica the strength to turn away and hurry back to her father’s side. She had a good feeling about Lord Caelian Dervock. He seemed like just the sort of adventurous soul she could see herself living out the rest of her life with, if only she could manage to get her father’s approval.

Chapter 3

Caelian could hardly believe his luck. Not in terms of his dragon. Something still wasn't right with the design, and he was grievously disappointed that his test flight on Sunday had failed. It didn't matter how long he pored over the craft and his design plans, he couldn't figure out why he couldn't achieve the lift he needed for a proper flight.

What made him believe he was the luckiest man in the world was the fact that Miss Erica Joyce seemed interested in continuing their acquaintance, and perhaps deepening it. Erica was lovely, with her dark hair and expressive eyes. It had thrilled him beyond telling that she'd seemed so interested in his dragon, and in flight in general. Then again, he had first met her when she was flying a kite near Shannon and Colin's cottage. There was something about Erica that spoke to him, something that whispered that she was so much more than she seemed.

At the same time, Caelian was also convinced that none of the normal tactics he would usually have used to woo a lady would work on someone as angelic and good as Erica. He couldn't very well take her for a walk along secluded lanes and pause under the shade of a tree to kiss her until she sighed his name in longing. And seduction—though he wasn't opposed to it in principle—was completely out of the question. He might have been an O'Shea and, as such, progressive in his views of the sexes and free love, but Erica was different. The only way he would successfully woo her was by rigidly following the rules of society, and to do that, he needed his sister's help.

"Please invite her to tea, Siobhan," he asked his sister on Sunday afternoon, once the dragon was returned to Benedict's barn, where Caelian would continue to puzzle over it until he perfected the design. "The only way it will be deemed appropriate for Miss Joyce to pay a visit is if she's invited by another woman."

"I appreciate your tender feelings, Caelian," Siobhan had told him while setting up the target for her archery practice in the back garden of their family home, "but I am not at all acquainted with the young lady."

“This is your opportunity to change that,” Caelian insisted. “There is nothing unusual with one woman inviting a new neighbor for tea so that she might become acquainted with her.”

Siobhan sent him a firm look over her shoulder, then turned to march back toward the house, where her bow waited for her in its stand. “You fancy this young lady, don’t you?”

“I do,” Caelian confessed.

Siobhan made a humming noise and studied him as they walked. “I can’t remember the last time you looked so adamant about spending time with a woman. Perhaps I do want to know this Miss Joyce after all.”

“Thank you, Siobhan,” Caelian said, pecking his sister on the cheek and knowing he’d won this small battle. “I won’t forget your kindness. I will repay it someday when it’s time for you to be wooed.”

Siobhan laughed out loud and snatched up her bow. “I have no intention of being wooed. Ever,” she said.

Caelian doubted that, but it didn’t actually matter. He had a tea to prepare for, even though Siobhan would be the nominal hostess.

Caelian spent the next several days making certain that everything would be perfect for Erica when she came to his home for the first time. He gave extra orders to the gardening staff to make the gardens surrounding the house as beautiful and clean as possible. He had the maids clean every room on the ground floor of the manor house from top to bottom, just in case it rained on the day of the tea and they were forced to entertain inside. He would have hired a small orchestra to fill the garden with music so that Erica would feel as though she were in a magical wonderland, but that seemed a bit much. He thought about memorizing a few Bible verses or studying a few of the more recent theological debates so that he would have something to talk about that Erica might be interested in, but there simply wasn’t time.

At last, the afternoon of the tea arrived. Caelian dressed with special care, made an extra circuit of the house to make certain everything was as it should be, then waited impatiently in the back garden, where he’d given orders for Singleton, his butler, to show Erica as soon as she arrived.

“You’re worse than a debutante waiting to meet the queen,” Siobhan laughed at him as she, too, surveyed everything in the back garden.

“I truly like this woman, Siobhan,” Caelian confided in her. “I like her almost as much as I like my dragon.”

Siobhan’s eyes went wide. “Then I suppose it’s serious.”

“Quite serious,” Caelian said solemnly. “In fact, I think it’s as serious as things can possibly get.”

No sooner were the words out his mouth than the sound of Singleton clearing his throat at the door that led into the house had Caelian turning to find that Erica had arrived.

Correction, Erica and her father had arrived.

As swiftly as Caelian's heart soared at the sight of Erica—dressed in a pretty blue gown, her hair caught up in a simple style with a fashionable hat perched atop it, her complexion as smooth and creamy as ever—it flopped to his feet at the sight of her dour father.

"Rev. Joyce," Caelian said, stepping forward and extending a hand to the man. He fought to keep his smile in place and to hide his disappointment. How was he supposed to charm and woo Erica when her reverend father was sitting right by her side? "Welcome to my humble home," he finished as he shook the man's hand.

He sent Siobhan a frustrated look, wondering why she would invite Rev. Joyce to tea along with Erica. But Siobhan shrugged in return and shook her head slightly, as though she hadn't expected the man to come either. Siobhan gestured for the footman who was standing by to fetch another chair for the small table under the canopy where tea had been set up.

"I did not realize your family's estate was so large," Rev. Joyce said, glancing around as though he hadn't yet decided whether he approved or not.

Caelian sent Erica a questioning look. Erica glanced back at him apologetically and shrugged slightly. That was enough to indicate to Caelian that Rev. Joyce's presence wasn't her idea either.

"The estate isn't half as large as it once was," Caelian said as he gestured for Rev. Joyce and Erica to follow him and Siobhan to the table. "It was quite vast in my grandfather's time, but the tenants were treated shamelessly, I'm afraid. My father was appalled by my grandfather's land management style and sought to invest his money elsewhere. He instilled me with those values as well, and between the two of us, before and after Father's untimely death, we arranged to allow many of the tenants to purchase the land their families had worked for generations so that they might own it themselves."

"And the whole thing didn't collapse as a result?" Rev. Joyce looked startled as he took his seat.

"Not at all," Caelian was proud to report. "As I said, my father and I invested our fortune elsewhere, and the sale of the land bolstered those investments." He glanced to Siobhan. "We are quite happy with the greatly-reduced estate, particularly as our family's recent decisions have improved the lot of the people who were so horrifically mistreated by my grandfather."

"How very admirable," Erica said, her eyes shining with approval.

Her expression shot straight to Caelian's heart—and other places, if

he were being honest. He wanted to shout with victory for impressing Erica.

"I am not certain I approve of the rash decisions of the younger generation," Rev. Joyce said, crushing Caelian's victorious mood a bit. "You progressive people are in the wrong. God created the world to be ordered. Who are we to question, let alone overturn, the natural order of things? Some men were meant to toil and serve, and others were meant to guide and rule."

It was a sentiment that Caelian had heard a thousand times over, though one that was quickly becoming antiquated as the twentieth century approached. He peeked at Erica to see what she thought of her father's ideas, but it was impossible to fully tell whether she agreed or not. In his heart, Caelian was certain that a woman with as much fire in her eyes and such a clever smile would agree with the newer ways of thinking, but he couldn't be certain until he got her alone, where they could speak more freely.

"How have you progressed with your flying machine?" Erica asked as Siobhan poured tea for them all.

Caelian was grateful to have a topic of conversation that wouldn't sail him into dangerous waters with Rev. Joyce. "Quite well," he told her with a smile. "I believe part of the problem on Sunday was due to a few bumps and jostles that the dragon endured on the way to the hill. Repairing those small bits of damage inspired me with an idea that will reshape the wings to provide more lift.

"Birds were created by God to fly," Rev. Joyce said, sipping his tea and smiling at Siobhan, "not man. If man were meant to fly, he would have been created with wings."

"Do you think we are all given wings when we become angels, Rev. Joyce?" Siobhan asked him. She asked the question with a straight face, but Caelian had a good idea that she was teasing the reverend.

"Perhaps," Rev. Joyce answered her seriously. "But it is vanity to assume that humble creatures such as ourselves can aspire to be like angels."

"But isn't that what we are supposed to do?" Siobhan asked on, her expression as grave as ever, though her eyes sparkled as she settled into her seat and sipped her own tea. "To be angelic?"

"Do you know, Lady Siobhan, I had not thought of that," Rev. Joyce said.

What followed was a discussion about aspiring to be angelic between Rev. Joyce and Siobhan that had Caelian in serious danger of snorting his tea with laughter at several points. Erica's poor father didn't realize that Siobhan was playing him like an angelic harp, but then again, Rev. Joyce was so charmed by Caelian's sister that he

didn't seem to mind.

Throughout the whole, slightly ridiculous conversation, Caelian kept making eye-contact with Erica to see what she thought of things. At first, he was worried that Erica would take offense to the way his sister was playing with her father, but that worry was short-lived. Erica seemed delighted by the whole thing. Whatever her spiritual leanings were, Erica had a sense of humor about her that Caelian liked.

"Would you like a tour of the gardens?" Caelian asked once the tea was drunk and the sandwiches and tarts were consumed.

"That would be lovely," Erica said, sitting straighter in her chair and glancing fondly at Caelian.

"I don't know," Rev. Joyce said in a circumspect voice. "Traipsing through gardens seems a bit forward for an introductory tea party."

"Oh, but I would love to show you our roses," Siobhan said, standing abruptly and prompting the men to rise from their seats as well out of politeness. Erica also stood and took a subtle step closer to Caelian. "The rose garden is a favorite of our mother's. It is a shame that Mama is visiting her sister, our Aunt Nora, in Drogheda. I'm certain the two of you would have much to talk about."

Caelian suppressed a smile as Siobhan moved smoothly to Rev. Joyce's side, prompting him to offer his arm so that he could escort her away from the canopy and over to the entrance to the rose garden. Caelian offered his arm to Erica in a similar manner, and the two of them followed, but as soon as they reached the carefully-plotted rose garden, he veered off down one path after Siobhan and Rev. Joyce took another. Siobhan peeked subtly over her shoulder, and Caelian winked at her in thanks, and as a request that she continue to keep Erica's father occupied.

"This garden truly is beautiful," Erica said with a fetching smile as their path moved farther and farther away from her father. "Once again, I am impressed with you."

Caelian beamed under the praise, but said, "It is all my mother's work. She planned the gardens, I merely hire the staff to maintain them."

"But even that shows a greatness of character," Erica said. "You could have neglected the gardens or plowed them under to erect some monstrosity of an outbuilding."

Caelian felt a jolt at her use of the word "erect". It was juvenile of him, but he was only human. His heart wasn't the only organ interested in Erica's loveliness.

He checked on Siobhan and Erica's father's progress quickly, then, when he was certain they were far enough away not to notice, he steered Erica out of the rose garden and into a second garden that was

bordered by tall hedges. Within seconds, they were completely out of view of their family.

"I'm not certain how much time we have," he said in a rush, "but I wanted to take this small opportunity to tell you that I think you are absolutely lovely in every way."

Erica blinked into the most dazzlingly beautiful smile Caelian had ever seen. "You are too kind, Caelian." She looked absolutely divine using his given name and lowering her head to glance up at him coyly through her lashes as she did. "I am rather taken with you as well."

Sweeter words had never been spoken. Caelian was so grateful that Erica was willing to speak so openly that he could have burst out singing. "I understand that you have very high standards," he went on, "and that your faith may prevent you from engaging as freely in discourse as I am used to." He immediately cursed himself as soon as the words left his mouth. If that wasn't the clumsiest and most blundering way to tell a woman that he would respect her innocence, though he himself was far from innocent, he didn't know what was.

"My faith is strong, but I fear my father exaggerated some of my godlier features on Sunday," she said with a flash in her eyes that was almost wicked.

"He…he did?" A whole different and far less angelic sort of hope filled Caelian's chest.

Erica took a step closer to him. "I can assure you that I have far moderner sensibilities than my father knows," she said in a conspiratorial whisper that had Caelian's blood pumping. "In fact, I would say that my sensibilities are far more similar to a dear pen-friend of mine who lives in Haskell, Wyoming, Miss Ellen Garrett."

"You have a pen-friend in Wyoming?" Caelian was delighted with each new thing he learned about the enigmatic woman before him.

Erica nodded. "Ellen is wonderful, and she is a font of information. Did you know that women have already been given the vote in Wyoming? And that some of the most prominent female citizens, women who direct charitable causes and influence political decisions, are former brothel owners?" She clapped her hands to her mouth as though she'd said too much as soon as the question was past her lips.

"I did not know," Caelian said. Her excitement over the matter and the mischief in her eyes decided things—he wanted Erica Joyce in every way it was possible for a man to want a woman.

The sound of his sister's and Rev. Joyce's voices from just on the other side of the hedge separating the gardens prevented him from doing anything notable, though. There simply wasn't time that afternoon, but there could be on other afternoons.

"Erica," he began, then stopped and asked, "May I call you Erica?"

"Yes, of course." Erica's eyes flashed with excitement.

“Erica,” he repeated, smiling, “would you be interested in helping me to perfect my flying machine? Perhaps in helping me with another test flight?”

Erica gasped audibly. “Absolutely,” she said. “I would like nothing more.”

Siobhan’s and Rev. Joyce’s voices were even closer, so Caelian took Erica’s arm again and pretended as though they’d been doing nothing more than strolling sedately through the garden without anything potentially romantic passing between them.

“Do you think you would be able to slip away tomorrow?” he asked as Siobhan and Rev. Joyce rounded the corner. Rev. Joyce seemed surprised to find him and Erica walking together alone, but his suddenly anxious reaction was curtailed as Siobhan raised her voice and pointed out one of the topiaries in the center of the garden. “Could you, perhaps, find yourself at Lord Boleran’s estate, Boleran Hall, shortly after noon tomorrow?” Caelian whispered to Erica.

Erica giggled, sending a furtive look in her father’s direction. The sound was like music to Caelian. “I can and I will,” she said in a quiet voice.

“Your father will allow you to go out without him?” Caelian frowned slightly in concern.

“He is not as much of a jailor as you would think,” Erica said, “and he pays calls on his parishioners in the afternoons, so he would not miss me.”

Caelian wanted to say more, to ask whether Erica was really willing to risk censure from her father by disobeying whatever rules he might have for her, but those words were forgotten as Singleton stepped into the garden, leading Rory Feeney behind him.

“You have another guest, my lord,” Singleton announced, looking peevishly at Feeney. “I told him to wait, but—”

“What a lovely estate you have, Dervock,” Feeney said, stepping past Singleton with a cheeky look for the middle-aged man. “If I had known it contained such beautiful things, I would have paid a call sooner.” He stared directly at Siobhan as he spoke.

Siobhan’s back went straight, and she glared at Feeney’s blatant appraisal of her. “You rudely interrupted Singleton, sir,” she said, her chin held high. “It might be the thing to insult members of the household where you come from, but in our house, we treat everyone with respect.”

Caelian winced a bit at Siobhan’s sudden temper.

Feeney, however, brightened considerably. “Yes, I would have paid a call much, much sooner, had I known.” He winked at Siobhan so salaciously that Siobhan yelped in offense. Her cheeks glowed a bright pink.

Caelian could see as plain as day where things would go if he didn't step in. "Welcome to Dervock Manor," he told Feeney, heading closer to the man, Erica still on his arm. He rather liked the feel of Erica on his arm as he greeted a new guest. "I regret to inform you that we are in the middle of a prearranged tea, but I suppose accommodations could be made."

Feeney held up one hand. "I have no wish to intrude. Although," he added consideringly, raking Siobhan with a look from head to toe. "Rory Feeney, at your service," he introduced himself.

Siobhan made another indignant sound, then turned to Rev. Joyce. "Rev. Joyce, would you allow me to show you the fountains on the other side of this garden?"

"Yes, I think that would be best," Rev. Joyce said, narrowing his eyes at Feeney, as though he hadn't quite made up his mind about the man yet. He shook his head slightly, then turned to Erica. "Come along, my dear, and let the gentlemen have their conversation."

"This won't take but a moment," Feeney said, stopping everyone from moving. "We have a bit of unfinished business from Sunday," he went on. "I am afraid we were interrupted before I could suggest that we put our flying machines to the test."

"Oh?" Caelian couldn't resist the draw of whatever test Feeney was suggesting, even though he didn't quite trust the man. "What sort of test?"

"A contest," Feeney said, grinning from ear to ear and peeking at Siobhan. "I propose that we hold a contest to see which of our gliders can fly farther and longer. We line them up, side by side, launch them simultaneously, and see whose flies better."

Caelian wasn't certain, especially since he hadn't gotten the dragon off the ground at all on Sunday. He started to shake his head and decline the offer, but Erica burst out with, "I think that's a splendid idea."

All eyes turned to her. Caelian fought the urge to wince.

Feeney looked delighted. "Excellent," he said. "I propose next Saturday for the contest, and we could even hold it at that lovely field beside the church where I found you in the midst of defeat on Sunday."

Caelian frowned. "It was not defeat, it was a test."

"Next Saturday would be perfect," Erica answered for him, smiling triumphantly.

"Your spokeswoman agrees," Feeney said with a laugh. "Do you, Dervock?"

Caelian had never felt more on the spot. The dragon wasn't ready for that sort of a test. Then again, if he backed down now, he was in danger of losing Erica's good opinion. There was an outside chance

that ten days would be enough to get his dragon to fly, but only an outside chance.

"Alright, I agree," he said, cursing himself as he did. "Next Saturday it is."

"Lovely," Feeney said. He turned to Siobhan and added, "I do hope you will be there as well, Lady Siobhan."

Siobhan frowned. "How do you know who I am?" she asked.

"I have heard the rumors," Feeney said with deepest gravity.

Rev. Joyce startled a bit and turned to Siobhan as though perhaps he shouldn't have been so open with her after all.

"I will take my leave of you now," Feeney said, tipping his hat, then backing toward the edge of the garden. "May the best man win."

Caelian could only hope that would be him.

"Oh, dear," Erica said quietly, glancing anxiously at her father as he and Siobhan strolled closer. "Have I pushed you into something you aren't ready for?"

Caelian glanced at her, and his whole heart felt as though it bloomed within him. "Not at all," he said.

"I will help you in every way I can," Erica whispered. "Tomorrow."

There wasn't time to say more. Siobhan and Rev. Joyce joined them, and together, the four of them made their way out of the gardens and back to the canopy where the table was still set up.

"I sincerely hope you crush that lout Feeney to a pulp," Siobhan said, then added, "Because if you do not, I might have to."

Caelian sent his sister a long-suffering look. Rev. Joyce looked startled. Erica hid her laughter behind her hand, her eyes sparkling. That softened Caelian a bit. Siobhan might have been a handful, but Erica seemed to like her. She liked his dragon, she liked his sister—Caelian couldn't have asked for anything more. Except, perhaps, for an answer to how to make his dragon fly and beat Feeney.

Chapter 4

Erica could hardly sleep that night for excitement. Caelian wanted to see her the next day. He wanted her to help with his flying machine. Caelian O'Shea wanted her. It was more than Erica could have hoped for at that first meeting, when her kite had nearly crashed into him. The fact that Caelian was a viscount was almost inconsequential compared to the fact that he was a pioneer of flight. She tossed and turned through the night, imagining how much renown Caelian might gain in the near future. She imagined that she, too, might share in that. She could be one of the first women of flight, and all because Caelian cared about her.

Waiting until noon the next day to rush off to Boleran Hall to meet Caelian was akin to torture, particularly since her father seemed to be keeping an unusually keen eye on her.

"Perhaps you might make those lovely scones that I am so fond of for tea this morning," he said over their early breakfast.

Erica blinked at him as she lifted her morning tea to her lips. "Scones, Papa? For tea? This morning?"

Her father looked at her flatly. "Did I not speak clearly enough, my dear? Yes. For tea. This morning."

Erica finished her sip, then put her teacup down. She wasn't certain she liked the direction her father's thinking was pointed in. "Yes, Papa, of course," she said with the sweetest smile she could manage. Her father most likely wanted to take a parcel of scones to whichever of his parishioners he would visiting that afternoon, which meant the quicker she was able to make them the sooner he would leave.

She set to work at once after breakfast, gathering all of the ingredients to make the simplest scones she could manage. But even simple things were a challenge when her mind was miles away, at Boleran Hall with a knight and his dragon. On her first attempt, she mistook the baking powder for flour and added too much to the bowl, ruining half of it. What she salvaged helped with her second attempt, but as she mixed the ingredients, she thought she spotted Caelian out the kitchen window and carelessly knocked the bowl over, spilling

flour everywhere. Her third attempt was more of a success, but she nearly ran mad as she paced around the kitchen, waiting for the scones to rise.

Finally, the scones were done, Erica made a selection of finger sandwiches at her father's request for luncheon, more tea was brewed, and just when Erica thought she might be able to slip away on an invented errand that her father couldn't possibly object to, there was a knock on the front door.

"Ah, she's here," her father said, gesturing for Erica to accompany him out of the kitchen and across the hall to answer the door.

Erica's heart sank with dread as she asked, "Who, Papa?"

The answer came a moment later as her father opened the door to reveal the august personage of Lady Coyle. The dread that Erica had felt earlier doubled, and it was all she could do to greet the woman with a smile. She and her father might only have been in Ireland for a handful of weeks, but it hadn't taken more than a handful of days to learn who Lady Coyle was. She was important, she was nosy, and after taking credit for a few of the more unusual matches in the county over the last year and a half, she had gained a reputation as an expert matchmaker.

"Lady Coyle, how good of you to accept my invitation to tea," her father greeted the woman with a respectful bow and a delighted smile. He extended an arm to invite the woman inside. "You do me and my daughter a great honor."

Erica kept her smile in place, but put a hand over her roiling stomach. Her father couldn't actually have invited Lady Coyle to tea to discuss *her*, could he?

Lady Coyle seemed to immediately confirm that notion by raising a small lorgnette to her eyes and studying Erica from head to toe. "You have a lovely daughter, Rev. Joyce," she said, sweeping Erica once more, then tucking her lorgnette away. "I can think of half a dozen young men who would be delighted to make her acquaintance."

The three of them moved into the parlor, and her father gestured for Lady Coyle to sit in the most comfortable seat in the room. "Erica has concocted a delicious tea for us this morning, my lady. As I'm certain you will see, her culinary skills are second to none."

Erica's face heated in indignation, but still she continued to smile. "I am only a passable cook, my lady," she told Lady Coyle. "And I am afraid I must be blunt and inform you that I am not inclined to marry at present. Papa and I have only just arrived in Ireland, and—"

"My darling, why don't you fetch the tea and bring it here," her father cut her off, a strange sort of anxiety in his eyes.

Erica's mouth hung open for a moment. She wasn't going to win the argument. That much was plain from the start. She schooled her

face into a pleasant smile, curtsied, then turned to head for the kitchen. As soon as she was away from the parlor, her face pinched into a mutinous scowl. Her father and Lady Coyle could plot marriage for her all they liked, but they could not force her to the altar. Blessedly, as she was only a vicar's daughter, she couldn't think of a single man who would want to marry her when she was unwilling.

If she were willing, however, that would be a different story entirely. She hadn't planned to put the cart so far before the horse, but if Caelian were somehow interested in making her his wife, she wouldn't object at all. That thought cheered her as she brought the tray of tea things into the parlor, where her father and Lady Coyle were discussing the weather. Perhaps there was a way for her to convince Lady Coyle to match her with Caelian.

"These are…charming," Lady Coyle said several minutes later as she bit into one of Erica's scones. It crumbled in the woman's hand, making Erica wonder what she'd done wrong with that batch. Lady Coyle set the remainder of the crumbled scone back on the plate and put the plate on the table. "What other talents do you have to recommend you?" she asked with a polite smile.

"Erica is sweet and docile," her father rushed to say, making Erica's face burn hot in indignation. "She is the model of womanhood. She will make a dutiful and respectful wife to whatever man is lucky enough to win her hand."

Erica's jaw clenched as smiled at Lady Coyle. "I was rather hoping to win the affections of a well-placed man," she said, pretending innocence. "Perhaps a viscount? Do you know of any single viscounts in County Antrim, Lady Coyle?"

Lady Coyle blinked rapidly in surprise. "I daresay I know all the single viscounts in County Antrim, my dear," she said, "but none of them will do for you. I do know of a charming apothecary in Ballymena who could do with a pretty and pert wife to organize his days, and perhaps improve upon his personal hygiene."

Erica couldn't keep her smile in place. It wilted into a grimace at the prospect of the apothecary in question. It was a harsh blow to think that was the best Lady Coyle believed she could do. "As I said," she tried again, "I have no inclination to marry at this time."

"Nonsense." Lady Coyle brushed away her protest with an impatient gesture. "Every young woman of your age wishes to marry. That is simply what young women do."

Erica pressed her lips together rather than argue the point. She thought of the women of Haskell, Wyoming, whom Ellen had written to her about. They were seamstresses with their own shops, they assisted their husbands and fathers in running ranches, saloons, and other businesses. They could vote, they could own property, and they

could make a difference in their worlds. While Erica wasn't willing to leave the life she knew entirely to move halfway around the world to a place like that, she still believed that, by Caelian's side, she could help to discover the secrets of flight. She could be someone respected and valued instead of a glorified maid.

"Do you know," she said, rising quickly, "I have just remembered that I promised to pay a call on a friend today."

"What, now?" Lady Coyle seemed affronted.

"You have friends?" her father asked. Erica found his question particularly leveling.

"Yes, Papa, I have made friends," she insisted. "And as it happens, one of them has been feeling a bit poorly lately, and I said I would bring her something to cheer her up. So if you will excuse me, Lady Coyle," she curtsied deeply to cover the fact that she was about to run away, "I will take my leave of you."

She turned and bolted from the room before anyone could stop her.

"How strange," Lady Coyle said behind her. "Although I do not suppose it matters whether the young lady is present or not as we discuss possibilities for her future."

"I worry about her so," Erica heard her father say. "There are a few…extenuating circumstances in her heritage that I am afraid could be a bad influence."

Erica nearly turned around to find out what her father could possibly mean by that, but she had the feeling if she didn't flee the house entirely, she would be doomed. It was warm enough to go out without a coat, so she plucked her hat from the peg near the door and sped out into the warm morning.

The walk to Boleran Hall was a long one, which gave Erica more than enough time to puzzle her way through the situation before her. If her father had it in his mind that she should marry, then she would end up married. Her father was like a dog with a bone when he grabbed hold of an idea like that. It was how they'd ended up in Ireland, after all. Her father was highly-respected within the church and could have been placed anywhere in England, but he'd set his mind on serving somewhere he believed he could make a difference—and Ireland, with its high population of Catholics that he believed needed converting to Anglicanism, was one of those places in his mind—so there they were. If he was already in consultation with Lady Coyle over her future, then that future was all but set. The only way to turn things to her favor was if she picked out her husband, and as far as Erica was concerned, there was only one man she wanted to marry.

As soon as she reached the field on Lord Boleran's property where she saw the dragon, Caelian noticed her. He straightened from where

he was tinkering with something on one of the dragon's wings, and as soon as their eyes met, he burst into a smile that rivaled the light of the sun. Their acquaintance was relatively new, and under other circumstances, Erica wouldn't have considered marrying a man in such haste, but her heart seemed set on the idea now.

As she drew nearer, Caelian's smile melted into a frown of concern. "Is something the matter?" he asked, abandoning the dragon to meet her. He reached out his hands, and, gratefully, Erica took them. "You seem a bit out of sorts."

Erica opened her mouth, but pressed her lips shut again without saying anything. She studied Caelian for a moment, wondering what he might think of her predicament. As forward and progressive as she believed herself to be, she wasn't bold enough to come right out and propose marriage to Caelian. She wasn't even certain she had the nerve to explain the entire situation thoroughly to him and imply that he should propose to her.

"I have just escaped from a particularly frustrating tea," she said instead, looking for the long way around to her point.

"I'm sorry to hear that," Caelian said, leading her back toward the dragon so that he could take up his tools and resume his work on the wing. He appeared to be tightening the bolts that held it together, and judging by the way the canvas covering the wings hung loose, perhaps he was adjusting that as well. "Who was in attendance at this tea?" he asked over his shoulder as he worked.

Erica hesitated, then answered, "Lady Coyle."

Caelian dropped his wrench. "Oh," he said, a pained look in his eyes. "I am terribly sorry." He managed a teasing grin as he stooped to pick the wrench up. "I am well acquainted with what tea with Lady Coyle signifies."

"I suppose that it is fortunate that I was made aware of her character before today," Erica sighed. "The woman wasn't a surprise to me." She pinched her face slightly, racking her brain for a way to bring the conversation around to marriage. Specifically, the notion that Caelian might want to marry her.

"She fancied herself involved in some of my cousins' matches," Caelian went on. "She still insists that Boleran and Colleen married because of her involvement." He finished tightening a few bolts, then set to work stretching the canvas as tightly as he could over the frame of the wing.

Erica ducked under the wing and took hold of the corner of the canvas to pull with him. "And did she?" she asked. "Have something to do with their marriage?"

Caelian laughed, then flushed and looked sheepishly at her. "I believe the undeniable attraction that Boleran and Colleen felt for

each other, combined with Colleen nearly burning the barn down and a stormy night in which my cousin was forced to stay in the manor house unchaperoned, also had something to do with it."

Erica's heart sped up, and not from the work she was assisting Caelian with, though it turned out to be more strenuous than she'd thought it would be. She hadn't realized Lady Boleran had misbehaved her way into marriage with Lord Boleran. From what she'd been given to understand, several of Caelian's cousins had ended up married because of bold and scandalous behavior. Perhaps that sort of daring action was not reserved for the American West alone.

"I think this should do it," Caelian said as he tied the canvas of the wing into place. "I've already adjusted and secured the other wing. I think this new configuration will do a better job of creating the lift needed to make her airborne." He gave the wing a pat, then turned to Erica with a brilliant grin. "Should we give it a try?"

All of Erica's troubled thoughts about marriage—forced or longed for—left her mind, and she smiled at Caelian with excitement. "Yes, absolutely."

"Excellent." Caelian smiled at her for perhaps longer than he needed to, which filled Erica with hope. He then turned away and headed for the bicycle at the center of the glider. "Stand back. I wouldn't want you to be hurt in any way."

Erica picked up her skirts and scurried away from the dragon. As soon as she was far enough, she turned back and clasped her hands to her heart as Caelian climbed onto the bicycle and began to pedal. They were near the top of a slope, and while it wasn't as steep as the hill beside the church, Erica hoped it would be enough.

Those hopes were dashed a few minutes later. Caelian pedaled and pedaled, the dragon's wings moved as if they were trying to lift off the ground, but nothing happened. By the time Caelian made it to the flat at the bottom of the slope, Erica could see he was disheartened. He slumped forward over the handlebars and rubbed a hand over his face.

Erica picked up her skirts and ran toward the dragon again. "Don't worry," she called out encouragingly to Caelian as she drew near. "I am certain you will find an answer to solve all of the troubles the dragon is having."

Caelian climbed slowly off the bicycle and backed away from the machine, studying it with a frustrated frown. "I don't understand why it isn't working," he said, though mostly to himself. "I have the wings configured correctly, the shape is right, it isn't too heavy. At least, I think it isn't too heavy."

Erica reached his side at last and, breathless from running, rested a hand on his arm. "You will figure it out," she told him with absolute

confidence. “You’re brilliant, Caelian. There is nothing you cannot achieve if you put your mind to it.”

“I’m not so certain,” he said with a heavy sigh.

Erica couldn’t stand to see him looking so defeated, especially not when he’d barely begun to tackle the problems in front of him. She’d barely begun to find her way through the problems that had been presented to her in the person of Lady Coyle that morning, but if determination could win the day, she would most certainly be triumphant. Caelian would too, he just needed a bit of encouragement.

Without thinking too closely about it, Erica stepped in front of him, lifted to her toes, and swooped in to kiss Caelian’s lips. He was startled at first—and she was, admittedly, startled at her own boldness—but that surprise quickly changed to a deep hum of interest. He kissed her back, his mouth molding to hers. Better than that, his tongue swept across the seam of her lips, and when she gasped at the sensation, he plunged inside.

Erica had never been kissed before, but as Caelian closed his arms around her and drew her close, exploring her mouth with enthusiasm, she decided that she loved it. And she suddenly knew why it was so frowned upon for young ladies to go around kissing attractive gentlemen. Right from the start, she didn’t want it to stop. She wanted to spend the rest of her life kissing Caelian, feeling his heat against her body and the strength in his arms as he held her. She wanted to learn how to kiss him back so thoroughly that he wouldn’t be able to think of anything else for the rest of his days. She wanted everything from him and then some.

“I will help you figure everything out,” she gasped as their kiss came to an end. She wasn’t certain if she meant flying or kissing. In that moment, she felt as though the two things were one and the same.

“You will?” Caelian asked, his brow lifting slightly as he smiled at her.

“I want nothing more than to make you a shining success,” she said, beaming with happiness from the inside out.

Miraculously, he seemed just as happy about that as she felt. “I accept your offer,” he said, kissing her again briefly, then letting her go. He kept her hand in his, though, as he pulled her back toward the dragon. “Now, let’s figure out the mysteries of this irascible beast, and then we’ll solve all of the world’s other problems.”

It wasn’t an immediate declaration of marriage, but Erica realized that wasn’t what she wanted just then. Caelian had just offered her something even better than marriage—he’d offered her the opportunity to help him with what was most important to him. That

was more meaningful than anything she could imagine.

Chapter 5

Caelian had a visceral reaction to the revelation that Lady Coyle had taken an interest in Erica.

"It has always galled me that young women are seen as little more than prizes to be won by whichever gentlemen presents the correct lists of recommendations," he told Siobhan as the two of them walked purposefully down the high street of Ballymena while running errands the next day.

They walked perhaps a bit too purposefully, and both of them wore indignant scowls, which caused other pedestrians to steer clear or cross to the other side of the street altogether.

"Lady Coyle is a menace, to be sure," Siobhan said with a huff, swinging the basket over her arm out of the way of an unsuspecting young lad who was in danger of being knocked down by it. "She perpetuates the notion that the only thing a woman is good for is tending to a man's home and his bed."

Caelian nearly tripped over his feet at the too-forward way his sister expressed the bold sentiment. "Heavens, Siobhan. I'd no idea Mama and Papa had raised such a revolutionary." He grinned proudly at her.

Siobhan stood taller, tilting her head up. "They raised me to have a mind of my own."

"A dangerous prospect for any woman," Caelian teased her.

Siobhan attempted to flatten him with a look.

"I am only joking," Caelian laughed, holding up his hands in defense. "You know I support a woman's right to determine her own fate. That is precisely why the interest Lady Coyle has shown in Erica is so worrying to me." His jovial grin fell back into a frown. "While I have come to know Erica quite a bit better these last few days as she has assisted me with the dragon, I cannot yet tell whether she's inclined to defy traditional expectations or whether she would bow to whatever sort of pressure Lady Coyle and her father might heap on her."

"I thought you said you found her to be openminded and intelligent," Siobhan said, her expression showing that she cared for

Caelian and was concerned about the things that worried him.

Caelian shrugged as they turned a corner and started along a more residential street to where their buggy was parked. “I believe her to be, but she has been raised rather religiously. And in spite of his shortcomings, she adores her father.”

Siobhan hummed, but Caelian couldn’t quite tell what she meant by that. “The solution is simple, of course,” she went on.

Caelian raised one eyebrow at her. “In what way?”

Siobhan lifted one shoulder in a coy gesture. “You must beat Lady Coyle to the punch and propose marriage to Miss Joyce before that harpy shackles her to someone of her choosing.”

Caelian stopped and turned to face his sister, a sly grin tugging at his lips. “Siobhan.” He arched one eyebrow. “I thought you were dead-set against marriage and romance of all sorts.”

Siobhan stopped as well, pivoting back to stare pointedly at her brother. “I am against women being forced into unions with men they do not love or respect simply because society tells them that is their place. I have no intention of marrying myself, but that does not mean that a lovely young woman, like Miss Joyce, should not be joined in matrimony to a man she could actually love.” She paused, then added, “Besides which, I trust you to treat Miss Joyce with care and respect in all things and to allow her to continue to have her own thoughts.”

Caelian laughed out loud. “You insist that you are not romantic and that you are immune to love, dear sister, but you fancy it just as much as the next woman.”

“I do not!” Siobhan shouted, her voice reaching a high squeak. “I find the entire concept of love laughable and unlikely.”

“I do not believe you,” Caelian said, slipping his arm into the crook of Siobhan’s elbow, as though she were the man and he was the young lady she was escorting. “I’ve seen the way you eye some of our neighbors when you think no one is looking. You aren’t as immune to male charms as you claim to be.”

“If I was looking, it was because I was observing a pleasing form and attempting to undress the men in question with my eyes,” Siobhan said loftily.

Caelian flinched and made a disgusted sound. “Too much,” he laughed. “I am willing to allow that ladies can have a mind of their own and that they are as capable of directing the course of their own lives as much as a man, but hearing lusty sentiments expressed by my own sister?” He feigned a shudder and made another noise of disgust. “I simply cannot tolerate—”

He stopped dead, pulling Siobhan to a stop with him, as Lady Coyle and Erica stepped out of a residence several houses in front of them. Instantly, Caelian’s heart beat in double time against his ribs

and his gut squeezed with longing.

Those emotions flattened a moment later as Lady Coyle turned to a rather irritated-looking Erica and said, “That was disappointing, to say the least, Miss Joyce.”

A different set of powerful emotions gripped Caelian at the melancholy that seemed to descend on Erica at those words.

“Mr. O’Donnell is a perfectly respectable man,” Lady Coyle went on. “His apothecary shop is well known in Ballymena, and he holds a seat on the town council. Any woman in your position would be honored by his attentions.”

“Yes, Lady Coyle,” Erica sighed.

Caelian’s brow shot up. Erica couldn’t possibly agree with that sentiment, could she?

He began to take a step forward, but before the motion could be completed, the door to one of the finer houses on the block opened and Rory Feeney stepped out, dressed as if he were off to pay a visit to someone fine and fancy. The moment he spotted Caelian—or rather, Siobhan—his expression brightened into a devilish smile.

“Lady Siobhan,” he called out as he descended the steps in front of his door and strode boldly over to her. “What a lovely sight to be met with this morning. Your beauty rivals that of the sun on this cheery day.” Almost as an afterthought, he nodded to Caelian. “Dervock. It’s a pleasure to see you as always.” His gaze snapped right back to Siobhan.

“I do not believe I have given you permission to address me, Mr. Feeney.” Siobhan narrowed her eyes at Feeney and shifted her basket so that she held it in front of her like a shield.

“I was not aware a gentlemen needed permission to admire beauty when it manifests itself in front of him,” Feeney said.

Caelian had never seen the blighter behave so charmingly. He wasn’t sure whether he was wary of it or amused by it. It was always a treat so see Siobhan bristle, and the way her cheeks went pink suggested her reaction to Feeney might not be the same as she claimed it was by her words and stance.

He was tempted to goad Siobhan into forming a closer acquaintance with Feeney, but Lady Coyle’s call of, “Lord Dervock, is that you?” distracted him.

Caelian twisted to face Lady Coyle and Erica. Erica seemed alarmed to find him there, which worried Caelian more than he thought it would. She appeared as if she’d been caught doing something she shouldn’t have.

With a final glance to Siobhan, figuring she was strong enough to handle herself where Feeney was concerned, he stepped away, approaching Lady Coyle and Erica.

“Good morning, Lady Coyle, Miss Joyce.” He tipped his hat to both women, then stared questioningly at Erica.

“Lord Dervock,” Lady Coyle began in her most imperious manner, squaring her shoulders and looking down her nose at Erica as she did, “would you not agree that Miss Joyce should be appreciative of the efforts that her friends are making on her behalf to settle her in life?”

Caelian’s mouth dropped open. “I…er…that is….”

“And would you not agree,” the lady went on without waiting for Caelian to stumble his way into words that might appease her, “that a well-respected member of the community, such as an apothecary, is the perfect sort of gentleman for the daughter of a vicar to set her sights on?”

“Well, perhaps he would be if—”

Caelian was about to say if the daughter in question liked the gentleman, but Lady Coyle assumed he agreed and rushed on with, “And would you not see it as an affront of a grievous nature if the young woman in question refused to walk out with the perfect gentleman? If she resisted every effort made to see to her happiness?”

Caelian couldn’t resist grinning at Erica, proud that she had stood her ground in the face of someone as formidable as Lady Coyle. Erica blushed under his grin, but apparently she was too miserable after whatever had transpired during the call on O’Donnell to smile back.

“I would say that depends, Lady Coyle,” Caelian said, standing straighter and addressing the woman with the formality that she probably expected from a viscount. “Do you truly believe that Miss Joyce’s temperament is suited toward Mr. O’Donnell?”

“Well,” Lady Coyle began.

This time, Caelian cut her off. “It is my observation that Miss Joyce is lively and of a curious mind, whereas Mr. O’Donnell is, shall we say, rather focused on his work and not naturally inclined to think beyond the usual strictures of society.”

Lady Coyle frowned and pressed her lips together, but Caelian had the impression the woman was giving things a thought rather than disapproving of everything Caelian had to say outright. “I suppose there is something to be said for that.”

As the woman lost herself in her thoughts, Caelian risked another peek at Erica and a grin to go with it. He would get her out of the muddle that Lady Coyle represented if it were the last thing he did, but simply marching in and demanding the woman cease and desist would only offend her and make an enemy. No one in County Antrim could afford to have Lady Coyle as an enemy. The far better option was to steer her in the right direction and make the woman believe everything that needed to happen was her own idea.

“If Miss Joyce is to be matched with someone,” Caelian went on,

“don’t you think that it should be someone with a broader view of the world? Someone with whom she could engage in intelligent conversation? Someone with an enterprising future in mind who could use encouragement and inspiration as he endeavors to do the impossible?”

Erica smiled openly at the picture Caelian painted, her eyes shining with affection. It came as something of a relief to Caelian. It was nice to see that she had guessed what he was up to with his list of criteria.

“Do you know, Lord Dervock, I believe you are correct,” Lady Coyle said with a definitive nod. She turned to Erica. “My dear, I do apologize for my miscalculations in terms of who might make a perfect match for you. I will endeavor to do better next time.”

“I do not think you will have to look far to find a better solution,” Caelian said. The truth had been staring him in the face for days. He liked Erica immensely. His heart was utterly taken with her. And though they’d only known each other for a short time, if Lady Coyle saw that they made a perfect match and put things in motion for that match to become formal, he wouldn’t protest.

Before any of them could say anything more, however, a shriek of indignation came from Siobhan, and they all turned to see what was going on between her and Feeney.

As far as Caelian could tell, Feeney had done nothing overtly shocking. He stood a few feet away from Siobhan, which meant he hadn’t touched her in any way. Feeney wore a devilish grin, though, and Siobhan glared at him, which meant he’d likely said something that Siobhan had objected to.

“How could you possibly object to such a compliment, Lady Siobhan?” Feeney asked, laughing.

“You call that a compliment?” Siobhan huffed at him in return. “I do not know what sort of manners you were raised with, Mr. Feeney, but I find them most certainly lacking. Were you raised in a barn?”

“In fact, I was,” Feeney laughed. He glanced momentarily to Caelian—who had started forward, knowing that he would have to step in to keep his sister from doing something truly shocking—before going on. “I am the son of a tenant farmer, it’s true. And I was born during a time of great trouble, when your sort routinely squashed the life out of my sort.”

Siobhan’s mouth snapped shut, and her face went red. “Our family did not condone the horrors that others of our class inflicted on those unfortunate souls.”

“Oh dear,” Lady Coyle said, hurrying to catch up to Caelian and gesturing for Erica to follow her. “This is not the sort of conversation young ladies should be subjected to.”

“Regardless of what your family did or did not do,” Feeney went on, still smiling as though it were all a joke, thank God, “I brought myself up in the world through hard work and diligent education. I started my own business by the age of eighteen, and by the age of twenty-five, I had made that business into one of the most profitable canneries in Ireland. Now, at age thirty, I dare say I could buy your family ten times over.” He winked at Siobhan.

Siobhan bristled. “You may think your achievements are admirable, sir,” she began, then floundered slightly, as though she’d realized she’d complimented Feeney when she didn’t want to. She snapped her mouth shut and shook her head before continuing. “Improving your place in the world does not give you license to be shameless.”

“It doesn’t?” Feeney blinked as though that was an entirely new concept to him.

Caelian sent Feeney a warning look, even though he was amused by the way the man could get under Siobhan’s skin. The obvious interest between his sister and his rival was intriguing.

Apparently, Caelian wasn’t the only one who found the prospect of Feeney intriguing.

“Are you implying that you have earned enough money to place yourself among the aristocracy, Mr. Feeney?” Lady Coyle asked, equal parts derision and intrigue in her tone and her expression.

Feeney grinned at Lady Coyle as though he were flirting with her —a feat that impressed Caelian as much as the successes Feeney had had in business and in flight. “I apologize for implying that I am worthy of the upper classes, Lady Coyle. I know these things are of utmost importance to you.”

Caelian covered his mouth with his hand. Feeney was obviously having a go at Lady Coyle and the rest of the aristocracy’s insistence on their own superiority, but Lady Coyle clearly didn’t realize it. Feeney snuck a glance at Caelian, and when he saw Caelian trying to hide his laughter, he relaxed fractionally, as if relieved he hadn’t offended Caelian in his attempts to tweak Lady Coyle’s nose. That raised the man in his estimation.

“These things are important,” Lady Coyle insisted with a nod. “But I do find your story admirable, Mr. Feeney. Perhaps you would allow me to call some morning?” She glanced to Siobhan, then to Erica, then smiled at Feeney.

“I would be honored, my lady,” Feeney said with a bow. It was exaggerated, and to Caelian’s eyes clearly farcical, but Lady Coyle remained oblivious.

“Very good, then.” Lady Coyle nodded, then gestured to Erica. “Come along, Miss Joyce. It is time for me to return you to your

father's home."

"Yes, Lady Coyle," Erica said obediently, though she sent Caelian a flashing look of amusement as the two of them walked past him, as if she'd enjoyed the entertainment that Feeney had just made of the encounter.

When they reached the end of the street, Erica stopped.

"Excuse me for just one moment, Lady Coyle," she said, then turned and hurried back to Caelian.

Caelian sent a look to Feeney and then his sister before striding to meet Erica far enough from the others so that whatever she wished to say would not be overheard.

As soon as Erica reached him, she said breathlessly, "Are we still meeting at Boleran Hall tomorrow to give the dragon another go?" She followed that quickly with, "I hope you are not offended by Lady Coyle's antics. I was forced to go with her today."

"I understand entirely," Caelian said, keeping his voice low, since Lady Coyle had turned with an irritated frown to watch them. "And yes, we will meet tomorrow. It seems as though we may have quite a few things to discuss at that time."

Erica's eyes lit with excitement. "Until then," she whispered, then turned to race back to Lady Coyle.

Caelian watched until the two women turned the corner, then strode back to where his sister was glaring suspiciously at Feeney. Feeney, however, had watched the whole exchange between him and Erica.

"Are congratulations in order?" the man asked.

Caelian wasn't certain how to answer. "Not yet," he said, still sorting out his feelings about how he should proceed. "I have a certain flying competition that needs must concern me first."

Feeney grinned broadly. "Perfectly understandable," he said with a nod. "After all, you will need something to cheer you after you lose on Saturday."

"How dare you?" Siobhan snapped, glaring at the man.

"My dear, I dare because it is my nature to do so," Feeney informed her, winked, then marched off toward the high street.

Caelian couldn't help but laugh, which earned him a smack on the arm from Siobhan. "Men are horrible creatures," she said, storming on.

"Perhaps we are," Caelian laughed. He glanced over his shoulder to the space where he'd last seen Erica once more. Without realizing it, Feeney had helped him to form his course of action. He would focus on the flying competition for the next few days, and once that was over with, whatever the outcome, he would approach Rev. Joyce and ask for Erica's hand in marriage.

Chapter 6

She loved him. If Erica hadn't realized that she was actually in love with Caelian before, the way he managed to not only convince Lady Coyle that she was wrong about pairing Erica with the wretched Mr. O'Donnell, but subtly suggest to the woman that the two of them should be together, that simple act of cunning and affection would have won her over. More even than the way Caelian had convinced Lady Coyle that her initial matchmaking impulse had been wrong, the kind way he had gone about it, without setting the august lady down or offending her, had won Erica's heart over.

It was all she could do to rush through her daily chores so that she could sneak off to help Caelian with his dragon once again. Blessedly, instead of surprising her with another unwelcome visit from a matchmaker, her father had plans to make his usual visits that afternoon. There was a catch, though.

"You will accompany me today, my dear," he said with a smile as he fetched his hat from its peg near the door. "It will do you good to spend some time out of doors, associating with our neighbors, instead of locking yourself away in this house."

"Oh." Erica blinked, her mind racing for ways to change her father's mind. Perhaps she shouldn't have used the excuse of staying home with letters to write or books to read so that she could creep off to join Caelian once he'd gone out as she had for the past few days. "I don't think…that is, I would rather…it is not that I am staying indoors, Papa…." She scrambled for a fresh excuse, but her mind was too excited with the discovery of just how much she loved Caelian to come up with one.

"Mrs. Branagh has been asking about you," her father said in a sing-song voice, as though visiting the woman would be a treat.

Erica winced. She was rather fond of old and feisty Mrs. Branagh, but not half as fond as she was of Caelian. "Perhaps another day, Papa," she said. Inspiration struck her, and she said, "I've already agreed to join Lady Coyle for tea this afternoon. She wishes to instruct me on ways to deport myself while calling on a gentleman."

Her father's eyes lit up at the prospect, which made Erica wince

even more. “Well then,” he said. “That is what you should do. We mustn’t deny Lady Coyle or keep her waiting.”

“No, Papa,” Erica said with pretend earnestness. “Enjoy your visit with Mrs. Branagh. I just need to fetch something from my room before I depart for Lady Coyle’s house.”

Her father moved toward the door, but turned back to look at her with a worried frown. His shoulders were bunched, and the lines around his eyes and mouth seemed more pronounced than usual. He opened his mouth to say something, closed it, let another, long moment go by, then said, “You do know how much I love you, my darling, don’t you?”

The expression of worry in his eyes was so pitiable that Erica crossed the hall to throw her arms around him and hug him tightly. “I know, Papa, and I love you too.”

He smiled, and for a moment there was something wistful in his eyes, like a distant memory hovering just beneath the surface, before he let her go. “Be good,” he told her.

“I will, Papa. I promise.”

She hurried up the stairs as her father took his leave. Once in her room, she watched from her window until she was certain he wouldn’t see which way she went when she left the house. Then she rushed back downstairs, plucked her hat from its peg, and dashed out into the beautiful, sunny afternoon and on her way to Boleran Hall.

It felt as though her feet had sprouted wings as she walked—and sometimes jogged—on her way to meet Caelian. She couldn’t wait to see him again, to tell him how deeply she admired the way he had handled Lady Coyle, and how dashing he had looked on his errands in town. She wanted to ask him if he had come up with any new insights as to how to get the dragon to fly and to discuss the latest article about aeronautics she’d stumbled across after stopping into a bookshop on her way home from the dreaded call she’d paid to Mr. O’Donnell the day before. She wanted to tell Caelian all about her latest letter from Ellen too, about the curious American sport of baseball, which prompted such excitement in Haskell and which had filled the pages of Ellen’s letter.

But as soon as she reached the property of Boleran Hall and spotted Caelian standing in the sunshine, framed by his dragon as it perched at the top of the hill, all thoughts scattered from her mind, and she was left with nothing but her passionately beating heart ringing in her ears.

“Erica,” Caelian greeted her with a smile. “You’re looking particularly lovely today.”

Erica felt herself heat from the tips of her ears to her toes at his compliment. “You’re looking dashing yourself,” she told him in return

as she approached the dragon. She reached out a hand and stroked the frame of the flying machine as she met Caelian under the shelter of one of its wings.

"Part of me was anxious that you might not meet me today after all," Caelian said. It was a serious sentiment, but there was a sparkle of mischief in his eyes.

All the same, Erica lost a bit of her smile, blinked, and said, "Oh? What would make you think I'd abandon you after saying I would come?"

Caelian's smile grew, then he shifted it into a pretend grave look. "With a patroness like Lady Coyle, I would assume you would spend all of your free time calling on gentlemen who fit her image of a perfect husband for you."

Something about the way he spoke and the intensity of his stare as he met her eyes had Erica's lungs constricting. "I do not think Lady Coyle has a proper appreciation for the sort of man who would make the best husband for me," she said, her voice coming out more hushed and expectant than she thought it would.

"Do you have an idea of who that perfect man for you might be?" he asked, one of his eyebrows twitching up just a bit.

Erica's head spun. A voice from deep within her urged her to lay all of her cards on the table and tell Caelian outright that it was him, only him, forever him. As much as she wanted to make the declaration, though, she couldn't. She wanted to hear him say that he loved her and wanted to marry her first.

"I might have an idea," she said all the same, tilting her head down and peeking coquettishly up at him. It wasn't like her to play the vixen like that. Then again, it felt fun and natural to do so. Ellen would approve.

"Is that so?" he asked, inching closer to her.

Erica's head spun. "I believe it is," she whispered.

"Wonderful," he answered, his smile growing. He inched even closer, then said, "I have something I'd like to ask you."

Her heart pounded so hard in her chest that she thought it might break her ribs. "Oh?" Her voice trembled as she spoke.

"Yes." Caelian brought his face to within a breath of hers. "Miss Erica Joyce," he hesitated for a moment, then asked, "would you like to try flying with me?"

It wasn't the question she had expected, but somehow it was a thousand times better. "Do you mean it?" she asked, barely able to draw breath. She blinked rapidly, then went on with, "Do you really want me to try flying your dragon?"

"Yes," Caelian said, brushing the side of her face with his fingertips. His smile was filled with affection and mischief.

“Something still isn’t right about the balance and aerodynamics, and it occurred to me that if I had someone flying with me, someone sensitive and intelligent and inquisitive, I might be able to find exactly what I’ve been missing this whole time.”

He was speaking with a double meaning, which only made Erica’s heart sing louder. “Yes,” she gasped, as though he’d asked her to be his wife. “Yes, I would love to fly with you.”

Caelian lingered closer to her, almost as if he might kiss her the way she’d kissed him the other day, before suddenly leaning back. “Come on, then,” he said, grasping her hand and tugging her a few steps to the body of the dragon. “I have everything positioned where it needs to be. Since the craft is constructed around this bicycle, I’ve made a few adjustments to the seat so that we can both sit on it.”

Erica’s heart lifted even higher. He’d modified his flying machine so that they could both man it. If that wasn’t a gesture of devotion, she didn’t know what was.

“Let me just get into position first, then you can come sit here.” He patted the second seat that had been affixed to the center of the craft, then climbed into the intricate framework of the dragon to settle into the original seat. Once he was there, he reached for two pairs of odd-looking goggles that were looped over the bicycle’s handlebars. He fitted one pair over his face, then held the other out for Erica. “Give me your hand and I’ll help you aboard.”

Few things in Erica’s life had ever been as thrilling as putting on the goggles Caelian handed her and climbing into the center of an aircraft. Sitting within the structure gave her an entirely different perspective of the machine. Her heart lifted in her chest as though it had wings, although that could have been from the fact that the new seat was fitted so close to the original one that her back rested firmly against Caelian’s chest once she was in position. She could feel his heart thumping against her as he adjusted the two of them together.

“Now, hold on tight,” he said, putting his feet on the pedals that would propel the dragon into its flight. “Here we go.”

Erica held her breath and gripped the sides of the craft as Caelian pushed it forward. She realized several things at once. The framework of the craft was stronger than it looked, but it also seemed impossibly scant, like the bones of a bird without the muscle and feathers. Its inner balance was perfect, and it felt as though the whole thing were destined to be in the air. The wings stretched boldly out to the sides, filling Erica with confidence. Caelian’s design would work. The dragon would fly. People were destined to take to the sky.

An entirely new, exhilarating feeling struck her as the dragon picked up speed as it traveled down the hill. It was more than the wind rushing at them, it was a sense of sudden lightness. She could

feel it take the wings and she could feel it in her gut. With a sudden gasp, she felt the entire contraption, herself and Caelian included, pull away from the ground. She squealed at the sensation and glanced down beneath the bicycle. Its wheels were no longer on the ground. The ground itself was two feet underneath the machine. They were flying.

She let out a cry of delight at all of the new sensations flooding her. Instead of looking at the ground that had fallen away beneath them, she glanced up at the sky. She was certain beyond a shadow of doubt that they could keep going and going, right up to the clouds.

That wasn't to be, however, and within a handful of seconds the dragon reconnected with the ground. There was a strong jolt when it did that pushed Erica back into Caelian's arms, but it didn't matter.

"We did it," she gasped as the dragon rolled to a stop in the middle of the field of tall grass at the bottom of the hill. "We flew."

"We did," Caelian said. He lifted Erica off the seat and climbed free of the center of the craft with her. They both peeled off their goggles so they could smile at each other. "It wasn't my longest flight or the farthest I've flown, but we definitely achieved what we set out to do."

"Yes," Erica said breathlessly, dropping her goggles to the grass and throwing her arms around Caelian's shoulders. "We did exactly what we intended to do."

She leaned into him, lifting to her toes so that she could kiss him soundly. Caelian responded to her kiss enthusiastically, making the most delicious sound of victory and need as he did. Everything about the way his mouth molded to hers and the way his tongue slipped past her lips to brush against hers was heavenly. Flying had been miraculous and wonderful, but Caelian's kisses were even better.

"Just a few more adjustments," he said even as he kissed her, his arms sliding around her waist. "We had it just there, we were so close."

"We're so close," Erica sighed, feeling something entirely different than excitement for the design of a flying machine coursing through her.

"She wants to fly," Caelian continued between kisses, sinking to the grass with her. "She wants to take to the air."

"Yes, she does," Erica agreed. "She wants." She wasn't quite certain what she was saying. All she was certain about was the need that rose up inside her with the same swooping sensation she'd felt when the dragon had lifted off the ground.

"Perhaps if she were lighter. Just a little less weight," Caelian said, then lost his train of thought as he kissed her and brushed his hands up her sides.

When one of his hands closed over her breast, everything seemed

to fall into place for Erica. She opened her heavy-lidded eyes all the way and gazed straight at Caelian. “Make love to me,” she said, breathless and eager.

Caelian’s brow inched up and his eyes went wide, but desire radiated from him in spite of his surprise. “Are…are you certain?” he asked.

Erica nodded. “I want it,” she said. “I want you. Now and forever. More than anything.”

“And I want you,” Caelian echoed her with passion, adjusting them so that they lay in the cool, fragrant grass. “Now and forever.”

It was more than a simple promise. It was everything Erica had ever dreamed of. She clung to Caelian as he dipped down to kiss her with fervor that exceeded even the most scandalous things Ellen had written to her. Erica’s heart sang for joy as Caelian showed her that he was not afraid to be bad when the moment was right. Not only that, he wasn’t treating her like a pure and delicate flower, worthy of respect but devoid of need, he was treating her as a sensual woman. He understood that she was more than the sort of woman her father preached about—she was alive and filled with desire.

“I’ve wanted you almost from the first moment we met,” Erica panted as she boldly undid the buttons of Caelian’s waistcoat. She thanked the forces of foresight that he’d already removed his jacket, since it was a warm day. “You’re the most handsome man I’ve ever met,” she said, tugging his shirt out of his trousers.

“And you’re the most wonderful woman I’ve ever had the pleasure of meeting,” he told her in return, his voice filled with ardor. He smoothed one hand down her side and pulled her blouse and chemise up from the waist of her skirt so that he could slide a hand against the bare flesh of her stomach. He paused for a moment to ask, “Are you quite certain this is what you want? I’ve never felt bound to society’s rules, but there is no going back from this.”

“Yes,” Erica nodded. “This is what I want.” She reached for his face and pulled herself up a bit to kiss him, then laughed giddily as their mouths entwined. “You have no idea how happy I am that you come from such a wicked family and that you have such questionable morals.”

Caelian pulled back a bit, shocked but grinning from ear to ear all the same. “My morals are not questionable,” he protested, shifting his hand up to the top of her corset and deftly unhooking it. “I am absolutely moral. I just happen to think it is not morally wrong to make love to a woman whom I adore and who adores me in return.” He lifted his brow questioningly, his hand stilling its work on her corset for a moment.

Erica nodded. “I do adore you,” she confirmed, barely able to catch

her breath with his hand so close to caressing her breasts. “I most ardently adore you.”

That was all that he needed to hear. He swooped down to kiss her with a bruising passion as his hand continued its work. Erica wriggled and shifted under him, opening her legs to cradle his hips against hers more firmly and pulling his shirt all the way out of his trousers. It felt divine to touch his skin and to feel the pull of his muscles as he moved above her. She wanted so much more than the way they were moving together with their clothes on, even though they were loosened. Just like her first experience of flight, she could see every bit of potential their activity had and how it could cause them both to soar.

She could feel Caelian’s growing impatience in the way he kissed her and the way his hand caressed one of her breasts once he had her corset loosened enough. She moaned with pleasure at the way he cupped and squeezed her, and at the brush of his thumb across her nipple. The wild thought struck her that she wanted to feel his mouth on her, suckling and licking her, and as if he could read her thoughts, Caelian obeyed. He pushed her blouse aside and leaned down to close his mouth over her breast, fulfilling every fantasy of what it would feel like to be lavished with affection and adored.

“Caelian,” she gasped, threading her fingers through her hair. “Oh, Caelian. More. Please.”

“My darling,” he sighed, then reached for the hem of her skirt.

She worked with him, wriggling so that he could draw her skirt up above her knees, bunching it at her waist. She’d loved the way his hands felt on her breasts and her stomach, but when he reached into the split in her drawers and danced his fingers up her thigh, teasing her mound, she made a sound of pleasure that would have made her blush if she hadn’t been so far gone with desire. The way he stroked and delved deeper into the wetness that had pooled between her legs was miraculous. It felt so good that she strained into his touch, seeking to pleasure herself with his hand.

The sound he made in response didn’t quite form itself into words, but Erica felt as though she understood all the same. Caelian approved of her wantonness. He was encouraging it. A part of her wanted to give him so much more, to let him have her and play with her for hours, but the newness of the sensations she felt and the overwhelming joy of their communion was too much for her. He had only just started to circle her clitoris with deft skill when she burst into orgasm, moaning and arching into him. He answered her cry with a sigh of his own and kissed her deeply as he stroked her, drawing her pleasure out as long as he could.

Erica felt blissful and boneless as the waves of pleasure began to subside. She missed Caelian’s hand as soon as he pulled it away, but a

far greater excitement took the place of her need as she watched Caelian race to undo his trousers and push them and his drawers down to his knees. Her eyes widened as his erection bobbed up, thick and hard, its tip glistening eagerly. A very small part of her thought she should be afraid, but eagerness silenced that voice immediately.

"Yes," she gasped. "Oh, yes, yes. Please."

"I only wish it could be—" Caelian started, but got no further than that as Erica pulled him down for another kiss.

He both groaned and laughed as he kissed her. She could feel his joy and excitement poring through her as their mouths joined. She felt it when he pressed against her and, without the fuss and drama that she might have expected from such a profound moment, pushed inside of her.

Her body resisted him for only a moment. There was a quick, burning sensation that was enough to make her suck in a breath and wonder for a fraction of a second whether this was quite such a good idea. He came to a stop, panting heavily, when he was lodged deep inside of her, though.

"Are you alright?" he panted, gazing at her with a heartwarming mixture of passion and concern.

"Yes," she said, smiling, and arched into him, embracing him with as much of her body as she could. "I am more than alright."

"My darling," he sighed, then began moving.

Whatever pain or hesitation Erica might have felt vanished as sensation took over. He felt good inside of her, so good. The way he stretched and filled her was beyond any pleasure she'd ever experienced before. She found herself sighing in time to his thrusts, which seemed to encourage him even more. His movements became fast and demanding, and the sounds he made rose to a delicious, fevered pitch before he gasped and strained powerfully into her a few times. From there, his movements slowed and his body filled with a palpable satisfaction. Erica smiled as if she'd been handed the most wonderful gift and embraced him with everything she had as he moved out of her, then rolled to the side. She rolled with him, and for a moment, they simply lay in each other's arms lost in bliss.

"Please tell me I haven't irreparably offended you," Caelian said, his expression slightly worried, once they had caught their breaths.

"Far from it," Erica said, stretching and snuggling against him. "That was heavenly."

"Yes, it was," Caelian agreed, kissing her forehead, then her lips. "And I hope we can do it much more and with less clothing in the future."

Erica laughed, not only for Caelian's twist of humor, but because his words implied that they would be together in the future. She was

certain that the two of them would marry. Sooner rather than later, all things considered. They would be one in all things—in life, in love, with Caelian's flying machine, with the home they would build together.

A thought came out of nowhere, striking Erica with enough inspiration to prompt her to prop herself on one arm beside Caelian.

"I've just had an idea," she said, blinking rapidly, her heart soaring.

"What is it, my love?" Caelian asked, stroking the side of her face and looking at her in complete adoration.

Erica glanced to the bicycle part of the plane—which was only feet away from them—then at Caelian. "You said that with less weight, the dragon could fly longer and farther."

"I did." He arched one eyebrow, as if wondering why she was thinking of such things now.

"What if *I* fly the dragon in your competition with Mr. Feeney?" she asked, heart racing at the mad idea. "Is there any rule against it? I am lighter than you, so I could fly farther."

Caelian propped himself on one arm beside her, bursting into a brilliant smile. "That's a wonderful idea," he said. "And no, I don't think there is any rule against it."

"Would you be willing to let me try?" she asked, more thrilled now than ever.

"Yes," Caelian said definitively. "I would most certainly trust you to fly the dragon. More than that, I know you will win."

Erica beamed and reached for Caelian's hand, twining their fingers together. "I will not win, *we* will win," she said. She knew in her heart that together, the two of them would win at whatever challenge they set for themselves. Not even her father could naysay them if they proved how perfect the two of them were together.

Chapter 7

The next few days felt like a magnificent dream to Caelian. He couldn't believe his boldness with Erica or his luck. What they'd done in the field, under the shelter of his dragon's wings, was scandalous, and he never would have dreamed of behaving like such a rake. He might have been an O'Shea, but he had his limits. Only now, he could see clearly how limits didn't matter one bit when love was involved. Erica had wanted him as fervently as he had wanted her. Perhaps more so. The more he came to learn about his beautiful, exciting, inquisitive, sometimes naughty beloved, the more he could see that she wasn't at all the fainting violet that most people believed her to be. He felt as though her true nature was a delicious secret that the two of them shared.

"This time I'm certain I will stay aloft for more than fifteen seconds," she said as she climbed onto the dragon's bicycle seat and adjusted her goggles to protect her eyes. "Are you ready?"

Caelian laughed. "I'm not certain I could ever be ready for this."

Erica turned her head to grin wickedly at him. The look sent spears of love and desire straight through him. He didn't think it was an exaggeration to say that Erica had won him over, heart and soul.

She must have won him over, otherwise he didn't see how he would allow her to do what she was about to attempt, or any of the things she'd done in the last few days, as they prepared for the competition with Feeney—which was set to take place on the morrow. Instead of launching practice flights in the field on Benedict's property, they'd taken the dragon all the way down to the hills and cliffs overlooking the ocean that morning. While he didn't quite have enough faith in the dragon's abilities to let Erica launch the thing straight off one of the cliffs, he believed in the machine enough to have her test it on a hill that was much steeper.

"Check the brakes on the bicycle," he instructed her as he stood up against the dragon's side, underneath its wing.

Erica squeezed the lever attached to the handlebars and nodded. "Check."

"Wing stability?" Caelian asked, reaching above him to smooth a

hand along the nearest wing. He'd altered the design just slightly to allow for more canvas to be stretched across the light frame.

"Check?" Erica asked, since Caelian was the one touching the wing.

"Check," he confirmed, then went on to ask, "Magnificent pilot?" He grinned at her and winked.

"Oh, absolutely check," Erica smiled temptingly at him in return, then leaned over the edge of the craft to kiss him.

Caelian met her lips eagerly. Yes, he was the luckiest man on the earth to have found and claimed Erica Joyce as his own. She was beautiful and formidable in every way. He even loved the way she wore trousers for the test flight instead of a skirt. Trousers were far more practical, but he would have understood entirely if she had wanted to put decorum above experimentation. Fortunately, Erica seemed to be hungry for experimentation in every way.

"Check," Caelian repeated in a low, lusty voice as he moved away from her kiss. "And now we're ready to soar."

Erica laughed and shifted to sit solidly on the bicycle seat. "And we're ready to test this dragon as well," she added with a flicker of one eyebrow.

Caelian was more in love than he ever thought would be possible. He squeezed Erica's hand one last time, then stepped around to the back of the dragon. "Give me the signal when you want me to push," he called back to her.

"I'm ready," Erica said. She lifted her feet to the pedals, then raised one hand. Caelian grasped the back of the dragon and pushed with all his might. The craft was purposely light, and Erica was surprisingly strong. The dragon rolled forward, then immediately picked up speed as it sailed down the hill.

And then, just as she was designed to, the dragon caught the wind and lifted up into the air. Erica squealed in delight and leaned into the flight, adjusting a lever or two to keep the craft aloft even longer. Caelian held his breath and watched her sail through the air. He wished he'd brought a watch to time the flight, but in his head, he counted, and it was a good fifteen seconds before Erica touched down in a downy patch of grass at the other end of the field, where they'd parked the wagon that they'd used to transport the craft.

Caelian broke into a run, racing to catch up to Erica. She climbed out of the dragon and removed her goggles with a triumphant shout that he could hear despite the distance and stepped to the side of the craft. She flung her arms wide and marched straight toward Caelian. When they met, Caelian scooped her into his arms, swung her around, then held her close and planted a gigantic kiss on her mouth.

"We've done it," Erica said breathlessly once the kiss was over—

though it would have gone on forever, if Caelian had had his way. “We are going to win the contest tomorrow for certain.”

“We are,” Caelian agreed. “And from there, who knows what will be possible?”

He pulled her close for another kiss, loving the way she kissed him back and pressed her body to his so fully. He wasn’t only talking about advancing flight when he wondered about what might be possible. He could see a whole life with Erica at his side, as his wife and his helpmate in all things. He easily envisioned a future where they would pioneer flight together, and where they would raise children who would become great aviators themselves. Even the girls. With Erica as such a shining example of the determination of women, he could easily see a daughter of his taking to the skies. Perhaps she would fly around the entire world someday.

Their kiss continued for far longer than would have been proper, if anyone had been there to see them. Caelian was deeply tempted to roll into the grass with Erica, as they’d done the other day, but all too soon, Erica pulled away from him with a regretful moan.

“I have to go,” she groaned. “Papa informed me that we are to have very special company this afternoon for tea.”

A horrified look came over Caelian’s face. “Please tell me it isn’t Lady Coyle again.”

Erica laughed. “No, I think it’s one of Papa’s wealthier parishioners, someone who may donate a large sum to the poor box. I really do need to be there to help him with that.”

“Then go,” Caelian sighed, then brushed a lock of dark hair back from Erica’s face. “Just remember that my heart goes with you.”

Caelian almost shook his head at himself for being such a sentimental fool as Erica kissed him one last time, then pulled away and started down the road that would take her home. He loved her more than he had dreamed would be possible, and as soon as the contest was over the next day, he intended to speak to her father. In fact, he had it in mind that he would bypass asking Rev. Joyce’s hand entirely and make a grand gesture by proposing to Erica on one knee after she triumphantly sailed his dragon to victory.

Images of how the scene would play out and the ways that everyone who would come to watch the contest might react played through Caelian’s imagination as he pushed the dragon around and attached it to the back of the wagon so that he could pull it home. Without Benedict and Avery there to help him lift the dragon fully into the wagon’s bed, the best he could do was to tow it, but Boleran Hall wasn’t far away, and he was certain the craft was strong enough for the journey. He might have heard one or two minor cracks as he pulled it along, but his heart was too filled with love and his mind too

occupied with coming up with exactly the right words to say to Erica when he proposed to note them.

His buoyant mood lasted even after he stored the dragon in Benedict's barn, then rode back to his own house. His plan was to bathe quickly, put on fresh clothes, and then to sit down with a pen and paper to write out variations of how he might propose to Erica, perhaps consult with Siobhan about it, but the moment he stepped into the house, he saw that his afternoon would go in a different direction. Siobhan was seated in the afternoon parlor, looking stiff and irritated, and on the sofa across from her sat Lady Coyle.

"Ah, there you are, Lord Dervock," Lady Coyle greeted him with perfect, if brittle manners. She set down her teacup on the low table in front of her, then fixed Caelian with a narrow-eyed look.

"Lady Coyle." Caelian returned her greeting with all the gentility that he could, stepping into the room with grace and confidence, pretending as though he didn't look like a fieldhand that had just come in from a full day's work. "What a delightful surprise to find you here this afternoon."

"The delight is all mine, I can assure you," Lady Coyle said, as though that were what she was expected to say.

"Lady Coyle has come to talk about matchmaking," Siobhan informed Caelian with a tight smile that came nowhere close to reaching her eyes.

Caelian's stomach clenched with dread, but a moment after that, a fleeting grin touched his lips. It would be a treat to see how Siobhan navigated Lady Coyle's machinations. Surely, the meddlesome lady must be there to figure out how to marry Siobhan off.

Caelian stood corrected a scant heartbeat later when Lady Coyle said, "You are a single viscount just shy of his thirtieth year, are you not, Lord Dervock?"

It was all Caelian could do not to sigh as he moved to the sofa where his sister sat and took a stiff seat next to her. "I am, Lady Coyle, but I am not currently in any need of matrimonial assistance."

"Young men of your status are always in need of matrimonial assistance," Lady Coyle said in a voice that had Caelian convinced she thought she was making a joke. She even glanced knowingly to Siobhan as if to confirm it. Siobhan smiled uneasily.

"As it happens, Lady Coyle," Caelian said, sitting straighter, "I may find myself engaged very soon."

"Might you?" Siobhan asked, her brow shooting up. She sent him an impressed look and nodded approvingly.

Lady Coyle cleared her throat, picked up her teacup, and shook her head. "If you are referring to Miss Joyce, her father would never approve."

The bottom dropped out of Caelian's stomach, and he lost his polite smile. "I beg your pardon?"

Lady Coyle finished her sip of tea and said, "She is too far beneath you, my lord, and her father already has another suitor in mind. One that I believe will appeal to the young lady."

Caelian's mouth dropped open, but he didn't know what to say that wouldn't give away the improprieties he and Erica had already committed. He wanted Erica, but he wasn't willing to expose her to the sort of scandal that could see her ostracized from polite society if Lady Coyle got wind of it and shared the information.

"No," Lady Coyle went on, pausing to take another sip of tea, "I have come to the conclusion that Miss Maeve Sperrin is the woman for you."

"Miss Maeve Sperrin?" Caelian repeated. He knew the woman vaguely.

"She is from a good family with connections to a marquess," Lady Coyle said, "she has been well-educated and is clever, and she is of an age to marry." She nodded. "The two of you would make a suitable match."

Caelian cleared his throat, shifting anxiously where he sat and wondering what the politest way was to tell Lady Coyle she was full of shite. "While I do appreciate your efforts, Lady Coyle," he began, "I am not well acquainted with Miss Sperrin, and my affections lie elsewhere."

"Nonsense." Lady Coyle waved away his objection, took another sip of tea, then put her cup down. "Gentlemen of your age and rank do not have affections. Now, I have several gentlemen in mind for Lady Siobhan that I am certain you will find most agreeable," she went on without giving Caelian a chance to dissuade her.

"My lady, as I have told you five times already during this call," Siobhan began, sending Caelian a look as if to tell him she'd been dealing with the woman's meddling for too long already, "I have no wish to marry. None at all. Ever."

"You are quite wrong about that, my dear," Lady Coyle told her, as if an inclination not to marry was equivalent to adding up one and one and getting three. "I think that anything less than a viscount would never do for you. An earl is what you need. It is a pity Lord Carnlough is your cousin, because if ever there were a man in need of marriage to steady him, it is that man."

"I have no intention of marrying my cousin," Siobhan said in a voice so flat Caelian was surprised the ceiling didn't fall and flatten them all.

"There is a dearth of suitably titled gentlemen of a marrying age in County Antrim at the moment," Lady Coyle went on, as if she hadn't

heard Siobhan's protest at all, "but that does not mean I cannot find one for you abroad. England is positively bursting at the seams with eligible noblemen in search of a lively wife."

"I'm not certain about that," Caelian said. He was having a hard time keeping his laughter in check, now that Lady Coyle's sights were set on Siobhan. "Does he have to be a noble?" he asked, knowing he was not helping his sister's irritation one bit. "Could he not simply be a wealthy man? Perhaps one who has made his own fortune and risen above his station?"

The vicious look Siobhan shot him was akin to being on the receiving end of one of her arrows. They both knew he was referring to Feeney. The more Caelian considered the idea of his rival and his sister, the more it amused him, but Siobhan was clearly having none of it.

Neither was Lady Coyle, as it happened.

"No," she said, "Lady Siobhan's mate must be a nobleman. I do know of a family in Shropshire that might do."

For the next half hour, Caelian and Siobhan were forced to sit where they were, listening to Lady Coyle as she prattled on, mostly to herself, about every unattached nobleman she knew and whether they might make a good husband for Siobhan. Siobhan endured the trial with more bravery than Caelian would have been able to show had he been a woman. To him, that was further proof that women were superior to men in every way.

Once they finally managed to bring the tea to an end—something that was only achievable after Siobhan lied through her teeth and promised to visit the earl Lady Coyle had finally decided was the groom for her next time she was in London—Caelian was left laughing over the whole, mad episode.

"She certainly is persistent," he told his sister as they walked back into the parlor and flopped into the sofas to finish their cold tea.

"A bit too persistent, if you ask me," Siobhan said one eyebrow raised. "Though if I were you, I would see to it that you've secured your Miss Joyce before Lady Coyle strongarms the poor woman into marrying the man of her choice."

Caelian lost his smile and sat straighter. "You know, you may have a point. There is no telling what Lady Coyle might attempt if she thought she was in the right."

"Indeed," Siobhan said in dread tones as she reached for a biscuit from a plate on the table.

Caelian grinned sheepishly at his sister. "To be honest, I was planning on proposing to Erica after the contest tomorrow," he confessed.

Siobhan sat straighter as well, smiling. "That's wonderful," she

said, biscuit crumbs falling from her lips. She swallowed, then rushed on with, “But Caelian, you really do need to speak to Rev. Joyce before you attempt to cause a scene. After speaking with the man last week, I believe he is the sort of man who would deny your suit because you didn’t consult him first.”

“You think so?” Worry filled Caelian’s heart.

“I do.” Siobhan stood and stepped over to pull Caelian to a standing position as well. “He is excessively protective of his daughter for reasons that I believe are important, but that I could not wheedle out of him. You need to go now. Keep things simple. Just tell him that you love his daughter and that you want to make her happy. I don’t see how he could refuse that.”

Caelian was carried away, both by Siobhan’s energy, his own feelings of deep love for Erica, and with a bit of worry, considering everything Lady Coyle had said. “I’ll go right now,” he said, as if it were his idea and not what Siobhan was pressing him to do as she pushed him into the hall. “I’ll simply ask him for Erica’s hand, and once he says yes, I will come home and prepare my proposal so that I can make it as soon as we win the contest tomorrow.”

Chapter 8

Erica rushed home as fast as she could without straining herself or putting herself in a state that would require a full bath to make herself look presentable. She did pause in the barn behind the church to cool down, sponge off, and change from the trousers she'd worn for the dragon's test flight into her usual skirt and blouse. Somehow, she managed everything without encountering anyone she didn't want to encounter on the road and, more importantly, without coming face to face with her father before she was in a presentably gentle state.

Even then, her father stopped in the middle of setting out their good tea set on one of the side tables in the parlor to study her as she stepped into the house.

"Where have you been, my dear?" he asked with a puzzled frown. "I was given to understand that you were tidying up your room and not out paying a call."

Erica scrambled for an explanation that would ease her father's suspicions. "It is a lovely day, Papa," she said, putting on a wide smile as she joined her father in the parlor. "I went for a walk, and I called on some neighbors while I was out." It wasn't a lie. Well, it was a bit of a lie. But she had walked quite a way to meet Caelian at Boleran Hall, and Caelian was a neighbor of sorts.

"I am concerned about the amount of sun you have been getting of late, my dear," her father said, continuing to fuss over the tea set. "Browned skin is unbecoming on a woman of your gentle nature."

Erica pressed her lips together and tried not to frown. In fact, browned skin was a sign of someone who worked outside and who lived by the honest sweat of their brow, and not someone who was closeted inside all day, living a life of leisure. "The sun gives one a healthy glow," she protested. "And it is a sign that someone lives an active and productive life."

"You are my daughter," her father said, shaking his head. "You do not need to live an active and productive life." He paused, closing his mouth, and tilted his head as he seemed to think about those words for a moment. "That is to say," he went on.

Erica held up a hand to stop him. "I know what you meant, Papa. I

still disagree with it, but I know what you intended to say."

Her father frowned at her. "I do not approve of all of this wild activity and wandering. It defies the meek and domestic nature of womankind," he said. Before Erica could protest, he went on with, "But I've discovered a remedy for it. I think you will be pleased with the arrangements I have made for you to fulfill every expectation that God has for a beautiful gem such as you."

Erica's mouth slipped open, but she had no idea how to reply to her father's statement. On the one hand, he was sweet to think so highly of her and to care for her. On the other, his vision of what a woman should be was as antiquated as the old clock that had come with the vicarage. She had lamented to Ellen about her father's ideals on more than one occasion. Above all, though, she was deeply suspicious of what her father could mean by a remedy. It must have had something to do with the guest they were having to tea that afternoon.

"Papa," she said, a note of suspicion in her voice as she inched closer to him. "Who have you invited to tea this afternoon?" Her heart fluttered as the sudden thought that he'd invited Caelian struck her. But then, if Caelian was the one coming for tea, he would have given some indication to her that morning. Even if he'd been attempting to pretend he wasn't the guest in question, she was convinced she would have known.

"Wait and see, my dear, wait and see," her father said with an excited and, at least for him, mischievous grin.

Erica wasn't certain she liked the direction things were headed in. "Since it is such a lovely day, why do we not serve tea outside in the garden?" she asked. "It is so lovely at this time of year, and there are shady spots where we could set up a table." And if she started to feel trapped and suffocated by her father's machinations, at least she would be able to breathe.

Her father tilted his head to once side, as if considering. "Do you know, my dear, I think you are right. We'll host our guest in the garden."

Erica was relieved that her father was willing to bow to her will on that one, small point. It gave her hope that perhaps he might agree with her on other matters. Caelian, for one. As soon as she was able, she needed to confess to him just how much she adored Caelian and suggest that she should marry him.

She helped her father arrange the small, wrought-iron table that already lived in the garden so that it took advantage of the shade of a large oak tree. From there, she assisted her father in draping the table with their best tablecloth, then arranging all of the things for tea. She even found a small vase and trimmed some of the finer blossoms from

the garden to sit on the table. But once their preparations were done, they were left waiting.

"What time did you say your guest was due to arrive?" she asked her father. Part of her hoped that, if the guest wasn't Caelian, they wouldn't arrive at all.

"He said he would be here by two," her father said, taking a pocket watch from his trousers.

Erica's heart sank. The guest was a man after all. "I take it he is late?"

"Only a bit," her father sighed.

Erica said a small prayer that whoever it was wouldn't come at all.

"Perhaps you should wait inside," her father said at last. "You are looking a bit flushed and dewy, and we cannot have that."

Erica considered being offended, but the prospect of hiding from whatever her father had in store for her wasn't entirely unwelcome. "I will do that, Papa," she said.

She headed back into the house, returning to the parlor with the intention of finding a book to read. Her mind changed, though, when she spotted her father's writing implements out on the small desk in the corner of the room. She'd received another letter from Ellen the day before, and she hadn't had a chance to write back yet. Since there appeared to be time, she headed to the desk, sat, and pulled out a piece of writing paper.

"*Dear Ellen*," she began her long-overdue missive. "*I apologize for not writing back to you sooner than I have, especially since I intended to ask for more details of the fight that you hinted broke out at Bonnie's Place. Were patrons truly fighting over the soiled doves in the streets of Haskell? Did one of them actually end up with a bottle broken over his head?*"

Erica giggled at the thought of the humorous story Ellen had told her in part before running out of space on her stationary.

"*I have wicked tales of my own to tell*," she wrote on, grinning as she did. "*Oh, Ellen, I am in love. I told you of Lord Dervock—Caelian, as he has asked me to call him, and with good reason—shortly after I met the man. Things have progressed swiftly, and my connection with the man has grown deep. So deep, in fact, that I'd wager I could teach Bonnie's soiled doves a thing or two. The other day, Caelian let me pilot his flying machine with him, and after a brief and exhilarating flight, we soared in an entirely more earthly manner. And Ellen, it was marvelous! I never knew love could be—*"

"Erica, my dear, he's here," her father gasped, bursting into the room and waving for her to come at once.

"Oh, Papa, my letter." Erica sought to cover the letter she was writing with one arm, but the ink wasn't quite dry yet.

“Leave it,” her father said, coming over to tug her out of the chair. “He’s here. He has arrived.”

Erica gaped and sent one last, anxious glance at her letter as she set her pen down and was pulled through the room to the hall. At least, with her father so distracted by their guest, she would have time to return to the desk and hide her letter before her father saw it.

“I know you will be on your best behavior,” her father whispered into her ear just as he nudged her out the door and into the garden. “Mr. Feeney is an important man.”

Erica’s heart rose and fell as sharply as the dragon had a time or two during an unsuccessful flight. She hadn’t truly expected Caelian to be her father’s guest, but seeing Mr. Feeney standing in the garden, dressed in a fine suit, admiring one of the rose bushes, had Erica’s heart thumping in near panic. Her father couldn’t truly think she would be interested in Mr. Feeney, could he?

Then again, she could see exactly how he might. Mr. Feeney was of a similar class to them, he was handsome and still relatively young, and he was wealthy. What was more, he had been on the side street that day that Lady Coyle had taken her to visit Mr. O’Donnell. Thinking back to that conversation, it seemed entirely likely that Lady Coyle had taken it into her head that Mr. Feeney would be a good match for her, and as such, she must have informed her father. On top of that, Mr. Feeney was also interested in flight.

Flying or not, though, Mr. Feeney was not Caelian.

“Here she is,” Erica’s father said with a proud smile, drawing Erica out to the tea table as though bringing out a trophy he’d won years ago and reliving that glory. “Just as lovely as I promised she was.”

Erica did her best to smile, but every part of her itched with awkwardness.

Mr. Feeney stepped away from the rose bush and came to greet her. “I was just admiring your roses, Rev. Joyce, but I see you saved the finest flower for last.”

Erica wanted to roll her eyes at Mr. Feeney’s charm. She stopped herself just short of being rude, however, because Mr. Feeney addressed the flowery compliment to her father and not directly to her. Oddly enough, it gave her the impression the man wasn’t flirting with her.

“She is my pride and joy,” her father said, then extended a hand to the table. “Please, join us for tea. Erica, my sweet, will you pour?”

“Certainly, Papa.” Erica smiled at her father, then at Mr. Feeney, then settled in at the table, taking up the job of hostess that had been thrust upon her.

“The church property seems to be thriving under your care, Rev. Joyce,” Mr. Feeney said once everyone had their tea and was seated.

“My daughter and I do what we can to make the property as uplifting as possible for the souls who seek solace and instruction here,” her father said. “My Erica is especially adept at gardening, though I don’t suppose you have a need for that.”

Erica nearly choked on her tea as she tried to interpret her father’s words. Was he trying to sell her to Mr. Feeney as a gardener on top of as a wife?

“I live in town,” Mr. Feeney said with a smile, “and I am fortunate enough to be able to hire a gardener to care for my small property.” It was a relief that he looked as confused as Erica did.

“Ah,” Erica’s father said. “My darling daughter is also an excellent cook. She made these tarts, didn’t you, my darling?”

“I did,” Erica said carefully, touching the lemon tart on her plate.

“They are quite delicious,” Mr. Feeney said, making a show of taking a bite of one.

“And she does fine needlework,” her father went on.

Erica let out a sharp breath and set her tea down. She wasn’t going to be bartered like a cow at a county fair. “Mr. Feeney, how is your flying machine faring these days?” she asked before her father could embarrass her more. She figured she might as well take the opportunity of the embarrassing encounter to glean information from the man about her and Caelian’s chances against him on the morrow.

Mr. Feeney seemed relieved at the change of topic. “She’s doing quite well,” he said. “I’ve mastered some of the complications of aerodynamics to a degree that I know your friend, Lord Dervock, hasn’t.” He added a wink to his statement that Erica wasn’t certain what to do with.

“Lord Dervock is not my daughter’s friend,” her father laughed anxiously, as though, without even being present, Caelian were an imminent threat to his matchmaking plans.

“Have you continued with your gull-wing design?” Erica asked Mr. Feeney, ignoring her father, even though she knew she shouldn’t have.

“It is the most effective design to achieve the proper amount of lift,” Mr. Feeney replied.

“Sandwiches,” her father said, rising suddenly from the table, a strange gleam in his eyes. “Erica made cucumber sandwiches earlier this morning that I’m certain are quite delicious.” In fact, she hadn’t done anything of the sort, but her father seemed in a hurry to leave the two of them alone. “Allow me to fetch them,” he went on, “while the two of you discuss the further intimacies of flight.”

Erica turned her head to watch her father as he scurried back into the house. So that was her father’s aim. He’d stumbled across something she and Mr. Feeney had in common, and he believed that if they were left alone to discuss it, an attachment would form.

Once her father was inside, she sent Mr. Feeney a guilty look. “I’m terribly sorry, Mr. Feeney. I do not know what pretenses my father used to draw you here, but I am afraid I must decline any offers of marriage you might wish to make.”

“Marriage?” Mr. Feeney’s eyes snapped wide. Then he burst into laughter. “Oh dear. I thought I’d been coaxed to tea this afternoon because your father was seeking donations to his congregation. Marriage was the furthest thing from my mind.”

“Truly?” Erica laughed, suddenly finding the whole thing amusing.

“I must confess, I receive quite a few requests for donations and funding for charitable causes,” Mr. Feeney went on. “And I am not opposed to giving money wherever I can. I know what it is to be poor and to struggle. It is my sincerest wish to give back to the community that formed me.”

Erica burst into a genuine smile. “You surprise me, Mr. Feeney,” she said. “My initial impression of you was that you were a heartless rake and a cad who spends most of his money on flying contraptions, and perhaps on illicit activities in town.”

“I do all of that as well,” Mr. Feeney said, touching the side of his nose and winking. “After all, what good is wealth if one does not use it to indulge oneself?”

“Then you surprise me even more, sir,” she laughed.

“And why is that?” he asked, smiling right back at her.

“I did not expect you to be so charming,” she confessed. “You see, Lord Dervock and I have an understanding.”

“Do you?” It was Mr. Feeney’s turn to be surprised, but he also seemed delighted at the information. “I trust your father is unaware of this understanding.”

“He is unaware as of yet,” Erica said, “but I believe Caelian will come to speak with him soon.” She used Caelian’s given name deliberately and fixed Mr. Feeney with a particularly open look to underscore her statement about their attachment. “I know you and my soon to be groom have a sort of rivalry, so I am surprised to find that I like you quite a bit.”

“It is a professional rivalry alone, I can assure you,” Mr. Feeney said. “In fact, I admire Dervock quite a bit. He is an intelligent visionary and a good man on top of that.”

“He is,” Erica agreed, beaming with love.

“And I find his sister quite charming as well,” Mr. Feeney went on, leaning toward her with a conspiratorial wink. “She is a wild beast in desperate need of taming.”

“Are you certain she wishes to be tamed?” Erica leaned closer to him as well, sharing his devilish look.

“Of course she does not,” he said, arching one eyebrow. “That is

what makes her so captivating."

Erica laughed at the prospect, and at all of the fun Lady Siobhan was certain to have while Mr. Feeney chased her. Part of her envied Lady Siobhan for the excitement she had in store, but not enough of her to give up the wonderful love she already had.

She grinned at Mr. Feeney and was about to ask him more about how he intended to woo Lady Siobhan when Caelian's sharp cry of, "What is going on here?" jerked her out of her merry mood.

She gasped and turned to find Caelian striding around the corner of the house and into the garden. He wore a look of shock and consternation over finding Erica having tea alone with Mr. Feeney. All things considered, he had no reason to feel slighted or threatened in the least, but it was clear that he did. Erica rose, gripping the edge of the table and praying that she could find a way to settle Caelian's upset before too much harm was done.

Chapter 9

If ever there were a complaint that Caelian's friends could use against him, it was that when he became focused on something, he suddenly became blind to everything else. He was guilty of it where his dragon and unlocking the mysteries of flight were concerned, poring over scientific journals and thinking of nothing else but wing design, lift, and aerodynamics when he should have been tending to his estate. And as he rounded the corner of Rev. Joyce's church and found Erica laughing with Feeney—and leaning close to him as though the two were familiar—he began to see that he had been more obsessed with wooing Erica with the hope of marrying her than he should have been.

"Caelian," Erica exclaimed rising from the beautifully set table, the color draining from her face, and stepping around as though she would approach Caelian. "I didn't expect to see you this afternoon."

A war instantly broke out in Caelian's heart. Part of him wanted to lash out, point to Feeney, and reply that he could see as plain as day that she hadn't expected him, otherwise she wouldn't be entertaining his chief rival and the man he was due to compete against the very next day. A more sensible part of him urged him to be calm and ask more questions before he rushed into wild assumptions.

"I…." He didn't have an explanation for his sudden appearance at Erica's party of two. Where was Rev. Joyce? How is it that the august man would allow his daughter to converse with a single gentleman alone?

He blinked and tried again. "I was just passing by on the way to my cousin Avery's house and I thought I would pay a call." It wasn't the best explanation, but it was plausible and acceptable.

"Oh." Erica wrung her hands in front of her, her mouth working as though she were searching for more words to say, but coming up short. She glanced over her shoulder to Feeney—who had risen from his seat but remained a safe distance away, behind the table. "My father invited Mr. Feeney," she burst out, speaking so fast that the words tumbled out of her. "I was not aware he was the guest we would be taking tea with this afternoon. If I had known, I would have

informed you earlier."

Caelian nodded, writhing with discomfort on the inside. "And where is your father?" he asked.

"Papa?" Erica glanced over her other shoulder toward the house. "Er…I'm not certain. He went inside to fetch sandwiches."

Caelian was no fool. He could see the situation that Rev. Joyce had set up. Clearly, he found Feeney to be the most suitable gentleman for Erica, and he had arranged for an encounter that would throw the two of them together intimately. Truth be told, Caelian was impressed with the man for concocting a plan that would allow Erica and Feeney to have a few moments unchaperoned while still maintaining every appearance of propriety. Perhaps the wily reverend wasn't as concerned with perfection and purity after all. Or else he was able to justify his actions because he believed Feeney's suit would be accepted.

That possibility made Caelian feel like an even bigger fool as he stood there, gaping at Erica, Feeney, and the lovely tea table. Perhaps he had rushed everything between him and Erica. Very little time had passed since they'd met, after all. Perhaps running over to ask Rev. Joyce for her hand in marriage was premature. Hadn't Lady Coyle said that the man wouldn't be amenable to engaging his daughter to Caelian? Perhaps Lady Coyle already knew that Rev. Joyce had his sights set in an entirely different direction. In fact, the more he thought about Lady Coyle's words from that afternoon, the more he was certain of it.

Caelian could see the benefits of the match too. Feeney was closer to being Erica's social equal, and he had made something of himself as well. He was intelligent enough to keep Erica interested, and he was charming on top of that, not to mention wealthy.

"Caelian, please say something," Erica said, taking a step toward him, concern painting her face. "You've gone all quiet and stiff. I must confess, it has me a bit anxious for you."

Caelian shook his head and sucked in a breath. "My apologies," he said, knowing his manner was too formal for a conversation with the woman he loved. "My thoughts were scattered elsewhere for a moment."

Erica moved even closer to him. "I am sorry," she said, apology and worry in her eyes. "Truly, I did not plan for any of this. You know where my heart lies," she said in a voice as low and soft as a warm summer breeze as she came close enough to touch his hand. "Mr. Feeney is charming and personable, but you know that you are the man I love."

"I know," Caelian conceded with a tender smile. He reached out and took Erica's hand. "I know that you would never be deceitful or

faithless." What he wasn't so sure of was whether he should be so rash and hurried when it came to decisions as important as whom he should spend the rest of his life with and join his soul with.

"I feel as though I owe you an apology as well," Feeney said, coming around the table at last to join them. "I came here under the pretense that Rev. Joyce wanted me to donate to his church. If I had known he intended to fling his daughter at me, I would have declined the invitation."

Caelian's shoulders unbunched and he managed a small smile at those words. "Thank you for your candor, Feeney."

"Miss Joyce is delightful," Feeney went on in a teasing tone—one that was closer to being brotherly instead of flirtatious as he grinned at Erica. "Were I not completely certain that her heart was already spoken for, I might be tempted to sweep her off her feet. I'm decidedly good at lifting things off the ground, after all. You'll learn that well enough tomorrow." He winked at Erica, then grinned at Caelian.

Caelian couldn't help it. Feeney was his rival, but the man was far too likable for his own good. It dawned on Caelian that, once they had their fun with the contest on the morrow, he and Feeney would make excellent partners in all things related to flight. They might actually beat some of their international competitors to sustained flight if they worked together.

He opened his mouth to say as much, but before more than air could come out, they were interrupted by the surprisingly irate figure of Rev. Joyce marching out of the house.

"Lord Dervock, I do not believe I invited you to my property this afternoon," the man said, storming up to their friendly trio. The force of whatever bad mood he'd fallen into was strong enough to have all three of them stepping away from each other in surprise. The man radiated upset.

"Rev. Joyce," Caelian greeted Erica's father as kindly as he could while so perplexed over the man's behavior. "I do beg your pardon for stopping by unannounced. I—"

He hesitated, deciding against what he'd planned to say next—that he had come to the vicarage to ask for Erica's hand in marriage. Not only had he come to the conclusion within himself that asking such a thing now would constitute too hasty a decision on his part, but with the glower that Erica's father had fixed on him, Caelian was reasonably certain he wouldn't get the answer he hoped for.

Instead, he finished his sentence with, "I was on my way to visit my cousin Avery—that is, Lord Carnlough—and as the journey brought me past your church, I thought I would pay a quick call."

Bafflingly, Rev. Joyce pulled himself to his full height and glared down his nose at Caelian as he said, "I am sorry to say that you are

not welcome in my house, Lord Dervock."

"Papa!" Erica turned to him in alarm. "I have never known you to be so rude."

Rev. Joyce lifted his chin even higher and, without looking at Erica, said, "Sometimes rudeness is a necessity. I am afraid I must ask you to leave my property, Lord Dervock, never to return."

Caelian flinched openly at the dismissal. Something was terribly wrong, but he could not imagine what. He'd barely had any interaction with the man, only with his daughter. Perhaps that was the problem—Rev. Joyce didn't know him well, and it could be argued that he was interfering with the man's plans for Erica.

"If I have done something to offend you, sir," he said with utmost respect, "I do hope you would allow me to make amends. I would be honored if you would call upon me and my sister again sometime soon. Siobhan has expressed a great fondness for you, and I am certain she would love to see you again."

For the briefest second, Rev. Joyce's resolve seemed to waver. But he pulled himself tight again and shook his head. "No, I cannot allow myself to be seduced by outward shows of respectability. I know what perils lie down that path."

It looked as though the man wanted to say more—and none of it would have been anything Caelian wanted to hear—but their confusing conversation was further disrupted as Lady Coyle strode around the corner, a somewhat puzzled look on her face.

"Why did no one answer the door?" she asked, then seemed to answer her own question with the scene in front of her. "Ah," she said. "I understand." She blinked between the four of them, her expression turning as confused as everyone else's. "Is something the matter?" she asked.

"Nothing is the matter at all, my lady," Rev. Joyce said, though everything from his tone to his posture indicated otherwise. "I was just asking Lord Dervock to leave."

"And I was hoping to discover what I have done to cause such offense so that I might apologize," Caelian added with a frown of consternation.

"And I came for the delightful lemon tarts," Feeney said, his mouth twitching into a grin and a sparkle of humor in his eyes.

Caelian might have enjoyed the man's teasing at any other time, but he was too beside himself with confusion in that moment. What could he have done to turn Rev. Joyce against him? Unless the man had discovered what had transpired between him and Erica several days before. He wanted to believe that was impossible. Erica wouldn't have dared to confess such a thing to her father.

No one seemed to know what to say next. They all stood where

they were, staring awkwardly at each other, as if wondering who would break the stalemate and say something first.

Finally, Lady Coyle said, “I see you took my advice regarding Mr. Feeney.” Her expression softened into a smile.

“It was a mistake,” Rev. Joyce said, shaking his head. “I should not have sought to importune Mr. Feeney the way I did.”

Both Caelian’s and Feeney’s brows shot up in surprise, and the two of them exchanged a look. Feeney still seemed amused by the situation, but Caelian was increasingly certain that things had gone very wrong.

“Oh?” Lady Coyle asked, glancing from Feeney to Erica, eyeing Caelian suspiciously, then glancing to Rev. Joyce in appeal. “I would have thought that they would make a splendid pairing.”

“I am afraid not,” Rev. Joyce said in clipped tones. “Now, if you will excuse me, I must ask you all to leave at once. We have—” He stared hard at Erica—whose expression had filled with more and more dread as the conversation had swirled around her—then finished his thought with, “We have a great deal to discuss of a very delicate nature.”

“Oh, dear.” Erica pressed a hand to her stomach.

Rev. Joyce most certainly knew something, and Erica had figured out that he knew. “Perhaps I could assist,” Caelian began, heat racing up his neck to his face and sweat breaking out down his back.

“You have done enough already, Lord Dervock,” Rev. Joyce snapped. “Please leave. All of you.”

The man most definitely knew. Caelian glanced to Erica, attempting to communicate with a look alone that he would stand by her, no matter what happened.

He wasn’t inclined to leave her in such a delicate situation at all, but Feeney said, “I think it would be best if we departed.” The way Feeney spoke and the knowing look that came over him hinted to Caelian that he’d figured out something as well. “There is always tomorrow,” he said, staring at Caelian.

“Yes,” Caelian said slowly, blowing out a breath. “I suppose you are right.” It pained him to leave Erica when he knew things had taken a turn for the worse somehow, but to stay would have only caused more trouble. “I will see you tomorrow,” he told Erica, eyebrows lifting in appeal, praying that she understood he wasn’t abandoning her, he was merely making a strategic retreat.

“I will be—” Erica began to reply.

“You will not see her again, my lord,” Rev. Joyce interrupted, taking Erica’s hand. “And now, I must insist that you all leave at once.”

Without waiting to see if they departed, he turned and pulled Erica

back toward the house.

"Good heavens," Lady Coyle exclaimed, looking as though she had been personally affronted. "What is going on here?"

"I think it would be best to let father and daughter resolve their differences on their own, my lady," Caelian said, gently guiding the woman to turn and walk back around the corner of the vicarage. "While I am not entirely certain of the nature of their disagreement, I believe it would be best to leave it as a family matter."

Feeney sent Caelian a sideways look of assessment, his mouth drawn into a sly grin. "A family matter, you say?" He swayed closer to Caelian and murmured, too quietly for Lady Coyle to hear, "Dervock, you old dog."

Caelian's first instinct was to balk and demand Feeney retract that statement. Only, in this case, it could very well have been the appropriate response.

"I am not entirely certain what is going on," he told Feeney once they'd helped Lady Coyle into her buggy and seen her on her way, "but I have a feeling it is not good."

Feeney clapped Caelian on the shoulder. "I adore the O'Shea family for exactly this sort of reason," he laughed. "You lot have raised scandal to an art form."

Caelian frowned at him and shook his hand off to stride over to his horse, who was happily eating the vicarage's grass along with Feeney's horse. "I was hoping to avoid a scandal."

Feeney shrugged and followed, mounting his horse in one smooth movement as Caelian did. The two of them started down the road together. "Scandals will happen, no matter what we do, because society has created ridiculous rules for itself that run counter to human nature."

Caelian made a considering face. He would have found that theory far more intriguing if someone he loved wasn't currently in danger of suffering the consequences of those rules of society. "I cannot help but think it is my fault and that I have caused Miss Joyce more harm than good."

Feeney laughed and shook his head. "Love always wins in the end," he said. "And if this conversation has been about what I think it has been about, Rev. Joyce will see fit to grant you his daughter's hand in marriage, whether he wants to or not. You'll see."

Caelian wished he was so certain. "How do you know about love?" he asked, sending Feeney a sidelong look.

Feeney grinned. "I have found myself recently contemplating all of its benefits," he said with a teasing wink.

Caelian could only assume Feeney was talking about Siobhan. His poor sister was in for an adventure if Feeney pursued his

contemplations.

Siobhan was the least of his worries, though. He would give things one day to settle, and then he would take action. He and Erica had a flying contest to win, after all, and once they did that, everything else could be sorted.

Chapter 10

Erica was close to tears as her father dragged her back into the house and away from Caelian and Mr. Feeney. Her father might have put her up on a pedestal in the way he spoke about her and interacted with her, but he'd never treated her like a child, the way he had just then. As she was tugged over the threshold and into the house, she sent a look over her shoulder to Caelian. He was trying to reassure her, she was certain, but at the moment, she wasn't certain she could be reassured.

"Papa," she gasped as soon as they were in the hallway, making their way toward the parlor, "I have never been so embarrassed in my life. What has come over you that you would treat me in such a manner and be so rude to our guests?"

"A great deal has come over me," her father said, his voice pinched with emotion like she'd never heard it before.

"And what possessed you to invite Mr. Feeney for tea?" she asked on as they turned the corner into the parlor. "It is as if you see me as nothing more than a commodity that can be sold to the wealthiest gentleman."

Once they were in the parlor, her father dropped her hand and spun to face her. "Do not lecture me about young gentlemen, Erica. I have discovered everything that you have been up to."

Erica's mouth dropped open, and she was ready to protest the astoundingly hurtful way her father had suddenly decided to treat her, but her eyes fell on the desk where she'd been writing her letter before Mr. Feeney arrived. Immediately, her mouth snapped shut. The letter was still there, but in a different place on the desktop. Her father had clearly read it.

A wave of fear passed through Erica. She had been entirely too open in the way she'd written to Ellen, revealed far too much. Her father might have been a man of the cloth, but he was not ignorant of the ways of the world. Suddenly, everything made sense to her, from the venom with which her father had addressed Caelian to the way he had dismissed their guests so coldly, even Lady Coyle.

"Papa, I can explain," she said, her voice wispy and shaky. In

truth, she didn't know how she would explain. She could tell the truth, but it would only make the situation worse.

"There is no need to explain," her father snapped, anger and hurt in his voice and in the stiff way he held himself. "I have been deceived, and by my own daughter at that. I have trusted you with a degree of freedom that most young women are not granted, and in turn, you have abused that freedom and run wild. You have ruined yourself, and for what? To catch the eye of a man who would never lower himself to consider a mere vicar's daughter for the role of viscountess?"

Erica's face heated with shame through her father's speech, but when he reached his final statement, she went stiff with indignation. "Caelian loves me, Papa," she insisted. "And I have every reason to believe he will marry me."

"Foolish girl," her father scoffed. "According to Lady Coyle, he will do nothing of the sort."

Erica's indignation doubled. "And what, pray tell, does Lady Coyle's opinion have to do with anything?" She crossed her arms. "Lady Coyle has had nothing at all to do with the love Caelian and I have for each other."

Her father let out a sound that was something between a moan and a laugh of derision. "Lady Coyle knows the O'Shea family far better than you do, my girl," he said with a sharp frown. "She knows that they are rakes and reprobates, the lot of them. They get themselves and others into trouble, and they don't always help them out of it."

"Caelian is not like that," Erica insisted.

"You have not known *Lord Dervock* for more than a handful of weeks," her father fired back, emphasizing Caelian's title. "You have degraded yourself for a man who is just as likely to cast you aside once you are in the family way and of no further use to him."

"Caelian would never—"

"You are just like your mother," he shouted over her, then winced and turned away from her.

Erica stood where she was, feeling as though she'd had the wind knocked out of her. Her father hadn't said a single word about her mother, not so much as a whisper, in years. To bring her up now was the equivalent of firing a cannon into a house of cards.

"I am nothing like Mama," Erica managed to squeak, her voice hoarse once she found it again.

She barely remembered her mother, but what she did remember was a sad woman who was prone to fits of weeping. She had adored Erica and used to hold her for hours, cradling her or watching her play. Sometimes she would force Erica to sit still so she could simply look at her and touch her face, but Erica had always found those

moments awkward and uncomfortable. She would rather have run and played than sit with her melancholy mama. When Erica was five, her mother had succumbed to a fever and died. Erica had been sad, but her father had always adored her and given her all the love and encouragement she needed. Her father had always been a happy man, unlike her mother, and Erica had spent her life drawn to happiness. So for her father to say she was just like her mother was akin to a slap in the face.

Her father let out a sigh, his shoulders dropping. He rubbed a hand over his forehead as though fighting off a headache. “You are very much like your mother,” he told her in a defeated voice. “I have tried so hard to keep the truth from you, but I see her nature in you, and I always have.”

“You are wrong,” Erica insisted. “Mama had melancholia. I’ve read about it in journals. She did not have the ability to be happy, like you.”

Her father shook his head. “Your mother was unhappy because she fell in love with a man who strung her along, got her in trouble, then abandoned her to ridicule and shame.”

Cold prickles broke out down Erica’s spine, and she began to tremble. “Papa, what are you saying?” she asked, her voice barely audible.

Her father looked at her with deep regret and shrugged. “She was overly-adventurous and carefree, like you are, my dear,” he said, his expression transforming into love mingled with deep regret and pain. “She was so intelligent, so inquisitive. But she allowed herself to be led astray. She gave her heart away too fully. She trusted too freely, and she was taken advantage of. When he came along and promised her the moon, she gave him everything.”

“Who?” Erica asked, her hands going numb. “Who was he?”

Her father shook his head. “I will not tell you. It would not do any good. And besides, I made a promise to Elise never to let you know.” He glanced out the window for a moment, lost in his memories, Erica was certain, then looked at her again. “Have you never wondered why your mother’s family has never been a part of your life? Have you never questioned why you do not know them at all?”

Erica blinked. “I thought it was because she had no family. She…I think she once told me she had no family.” Suddenly, she wasn’t certain whether her mother had actually said such a thing or if she’d invented it herself to explain why she had no contact with her mother’s relatives.

“Perhaps she did, but if so, it was a lie meant to protect you,” her father said. “When they discovered she was with child, they cast her out without a penny to her name. She was from a respectable enough

family, one that could have afforded to send her to relatives abroad or find a place for her somewhere, but they did not. They cut her off entirely." He sighed and rubbed a hand over his face. "Elise was my friend. She had been my friend since childhood. I was the only one she could turn to, and of course I took her in immediately and without question. She was honest with me from the start, and I promised to raise her child as if she were my own." He sent Erica a significant look.

Erica was grateful to be standing next to a chair. Her knees gave out, and she sank heavily into the chair before she could stop herself. Her whole world had just been upended, everything she thought she had known about herself had been obliterated.

"I tried with everything I had to make Elise's life happy," her father—and she was adamant that he was still her father in every way that counted—went on, sinking to a crouch beside her chair and taking her hand in his, "but between that man and her family and the way they all abandoned her in her hour of need, she never recovered. She loved you," he added, resting a hand on the side of Erica's face, "but you bear such a strong resemblance to her family. You are the exact copy of her sister—a sister who never spoke to her again after she was cast out. Her heart broke again every time she looked at you and remembered what she had lost, and when she fell ill, she had no will to recover. She let the fever take her."

He pulled her hand to his lips and kissed her knuckles. "I cannot let the same thing happen to you, my darling," he said, tears forming in his eyes. "You are heading down exactly the same path Elise did, and I cannot bear to lose anyone else to that sort of wickedness. I love you as I've never loved anyone before, and it would crush me to watch you ostracized from society, as Elise was, to watch you fade into a ghost of the woman you are now when the man you think you love tosses you aside like rubbish."

"Caelian wouldn't do that," Erica whispered, her heart too full of a legacy of sorrow she didn't know she'd been carrying for twenty years.

Her father shook his head. "Your mother didn't think *he* would do that either." He lowered his head. "I have seen all of the qualities that made your mother so lively and amiable blossom in you. And when I saw you begin to give your heart away to Lord Dervock, I knew I needed to take action. Perhaps it was foolish of me, but I believed Mr. Feeney would not only be a suitable match for you, I thought that if you married a man of substance and power, Elise's family might hear of it and reconsider the way they turned their backs on her and on you." He shook his head. "Forgive me for being so spiteful and selfish."

Erica didn't know what to say. She wasn't entirely certain her

father's actions were spiteful or selfish. She understood the pain he had carried with him for her whole life, but that did not excuse him from attempting to stand in the way of her happiness with Caelian.

"Papa," she said, resting her hands on his cheeks and tilting his head up to meet her gaze. "You are and will always be my Papa," she said instead of rushing into a defense of her actions. She felt deep within her that he needed to hear that, and indeed, his eyes turned glassy with grateful tears. But she went on with, "You have to believe me when I say that Caelian is not like that. I know what you read in the letter I was writing to Ellen, and I am sorry that you discovered my secret that way instead of from my own lips. I know it doesn't change things or change how you feel about Caelian, but none of what happened between us was premeditated. In fact, it is entirely likely that I seduced him." She couldn't look her father in the eye as she confessed her sins.

Her father took in a shaking breath and stood. "Women are never the instigators of seduction," he said, falling into his sermonizing voice. "What Lord Dervock did was wrong. You are a sweet, fragile creature, as was your mother. It was not within your power to resist him, just as it was not within Elise's power—" He cut himself off, turning away from her and blinking, as though fighting back tears.

Erica rose with a frown. "That is not true, Papa, and I am not my mother. I am very sorry that a wicked and cruel man ruined her life, but you must believe me when I say that Caelian is the very opposite of the sort of man who would do the things you just told me."

"I wish that were true, my heart, but I have seen more of the world than you have," her father insisted.

"And I know Caelian, and myself, better than you do, Papa." Erica's frustration mounted as she found herself unable to make her father see anything other than an old, sad story that was in no danger of repeating itself.

Her father shook his head. "You are following the same path Elise did. You've lied to me about where you have been since making Lord Dervock's acquaintance, have you not?"

Erica glanced down guiltily.

"You have kept secrets from me in a way that you never have before," he went on. "You have entrusted those secrets to a distant friend instead of being open and honest, just as your mother did with an acquaintance of hers from London. An acquaintance who, I might add," he spoke over Erica's attempt to interject, "not only turned her back on Elise when she was cast out, but spread rumors about her throughout London as well."

Erica wanted to protest that Ellen would never betray her that way, and even if she did, Ellen was thousands of miles away in

America.

Her father went on, clearly as frustrated with her as she was with him. “I cannot let you repeat your mother’s mistakes,” he said. “I know you are angry with me for it, but I must forbid you from seeing Lord Dervock again.”

“But Papa, I must attend the flying contest that he and Mr. Feeney have tomorrow.” Part of her thought she owed it to her father to reveal that she was supposed to pilot the dragon, but the rest of her knew that would work against her.

Either way, her father shook his head. “No,” he said. “I must forbid it. Until I decide what should be done with you, I am confining you to your room.” He took her hand and walked with her out of the parlor and up the stairs.

“Papa, no,” Erica protested. She attempted to pull her hand out of his, but he held her firmly. “I am not a child,” she argued.

“Until I am convinced that you will behave yourself and not repeat your mother’s mistakes, I am afraid, my dear, that I must treat you as one,” he said as they reached the top of the stairs and walked across the hall and into Erica’s bedroom. “You must believe me when I tell you how close to danger you are. It could already be too late.”

“And you must believe me when I tell you that Caelian is a good and upright man, one who would never cast me aside, under any circumstances.” In fact, she wondered if the reason Caelian had wandered by their house that afternoon was more than coincidence because he was on his way to visit someone else. But if that were the case, if he had come to speak to her father, why hadn’t he?

The answer to that was obvious. Because her father had already discovered her letter to Ellen, had already discovered the truth of what had transpired between her and Caelian, and had already turned his heart against Caelian. And if her father was so dead set against Caelian now, what could either of them do to change his mind and get him to see that they were meant to be?

“I will bring you supper this evening,” her father said, letting her hand go and backing toward the door. “But for now, I think it best if you take some time to yourself to contemplate what you have done, what your mother’s fate was, and how you should proceed.”

“Papa, is this truly necessary?” She threw up her hands but didn’t bolt for the door or make a bid for freedom. Nothing needed to be done immediately, and, in fact, if they both took some time to think things through, perhaps each of them would be better able to see the other’s point of view.

“I do think is necessary,” her father said with a nod. “It may also be necessary for me to ask the church about a different living, one in England.”

With that, her father backed out of the room entirely and shut the door behind him.

“Papa, no,” Erica called, stepping toward the door. “I’ve no wish to return to England, and I don’t think you do either.”

Before she could throw open the door and continue the argument, she heard the click of the lock turning.

“Papa, you didn’t!” she gasped, then tried the door handle. It was locked. Her father had locked her in her room. “Papa, this is uncalled for,” she shouted, banging on the door with one hand.

“It is necessary,” he called back. “After the deceitful way you have behaved these past few weeks, I cannot trust you not to run if given the chance.”

“Papa, that is not fair,” Erica insisted, resting her hands on the door. “When will you let me out?”

“When you have agreed to behave yourself and never see Lord Dervock again,” he answered.

Erica wanted to keep banging on her door in protest, but she heard her father’s footsteps retreating down the stairs. She sighed and turned to lean her shoulder against the door. As much of a shock as it was to discover that her father was not her sire, she had still learned stubbornness from the man. The trouble was, she had no intention of never seeing Caelian again. Her father was right to assume that she would fly to Caelian at the first chance she got. And if he intended to keep her locked in her room until she agreed never to see Caelian again, she would be locked in her room forever.

Chapter 11

Erica didn't sleep well, but she did sleep. The morning of the contest dawned with clear skies and promise in the air. It was a perfect day for flying, with just a hint of wind, but not so much that it would upset the stability of the flying machines. She rose from her bed, went about her morning ablutions, and rehearsed the careful arguments with her father that she'd come up with through the night. Part of her father's disappointment in her had come because she hadn't been honest with him about helping Caelian with his flying machine, so if she were truthful about that, there was a possibility he would relent and see things her way. Her father was not a complete tyrant, after all.

But when she moved to her door and turned the handle, intending to go downstairs and speak to him, her door was still locked. She tried the handle a second time just to be sure.

"Papa?" she asked through the solid wood, hoping her father was near enough to hear her pleas. "Papa, will you let me out now?"

Silence followed, although she did hear movement from downstairs.

"Papa." She raised her voice and knocked on her own door. "Papa, enough of this. I have…I have important things to do today."

"Nothing is more important than pausing to consider the consequences of your actions, my dear," her father called back from downstairs.

Erica wasn't amused by his statement in the least. She banged on her door. "Papa, this is absurd. Let me out at once. Please." When she heard nothing but an indistinct sound from the other side of the door, she pounded harder. "Papa! Let me out of here at once."

"Not until I speak with Lady Coyle on this matter," her father called back.

"Lady Coyle?" Erica recoiled from her door, her face pinching in frustration. "Papa, Lady Coyle has no place in this."

"She has been a true and wise ally," her father argued. "But rest assured, I am departing for her estate right away. This unfortunate matter will be solved by lunch."

Erica made an even sourer face. If Lady Coyle was involved, chances were that the solution would end up with her engaged to Mr. O'Donnell, the apothecary, or someone of his ilk.

"This is intolerable, Papa," she called through the door, leaning her shoulder against it. "I am not a child anymore. Please let me out so that we might discuss this as two grown people."

"I am on my way now, dearest," her father called back, seemingly ignoring her.

"I have an engagement this morning," Erica protested. "I need to attend the flying competition in just a few hours. Papa, it is happening in the field adjacent to the church. I won't even go far. I need to go because I am supposed to fly Caelian's dragon."

Silence followed her words, which she found foreboding, considering she'd confessed something that she knew her father would not approve of. She listened, pressing her ear to the door, but there were no sounds at all. There were, however, a few thumps and the whinny of their horse outside. Erica rushed to the window and craned her neck to glance out. Sure enough, her father had already hitched the buggy and was driving away from the house.

She dashed to the other window of her room, which looked out on a different aspect of the countryside, including the field where the contest was set to take place. Already, she could see people gathering at the top of the hill. Mr. Feeney appeared to already be there with his flying machine, which meant Caelian would be there soon. She pounded her hand against the side of the window and let out a sigh. Her life and her love were so close, and yet she was locked away from them as surely as if she were in England.

She let out a breath and went to sit on her bed. She wasn't going to stand for being treated like a child, even if her father had the best motivations at heart. She would find a way to escape from her room, her house, and the strictures her father had placed on her, and she would fly the dragon in the contest.

CAELIAN ARRIVED at the field beside the church only a short while after the time he was supposed to be there. He was happy to find Feeney already there, but puzzled that Erica wasn't already pacing the hilltop, ready to scold him for being late.

"Where is your lady love?" Avery asked with a grin from where he and Benedict rode in the bed of the wagon, helping to keep the dragon steady until they reached the launching point.

"That is precisely what I was wondering myself," Caelian said with a concerned frown. He craned his neck to look down the hill, to where a small audience had gathered to watch the contest.

Siobhan, who had insisted on riding with him in the wagon instead

of in the carriages containing their O'Shea cousins, along with their various husbands and children, patted his knee with a sympathetic smile. "Perhaps she is waiting for you to arrive first so that she does not have to make awkward conversation with all these people."

Caelian sent her a grateful smile. That was a reasonable explanation if ever he'd heard one.

Siobhan's explanation set him at ease for a while and helped him to focus on the task of removing the dragon from the wagon and lining it up on the hill beside Feeney's contraption. He eyed Feeney's machine warily, impressed with its design.

"I see you've brought your dragon with you," Feeney said with a sly grin as he approached their group. He had a glint in his eyes and practically screamed mischief.

"Of course he brought his dragon," Siobhan huffed at him and shook her head as she helped Caelian tug a bit of canvas over one of the wings tighter. "It's a flying contest, you dolt."

"Ah, yes." Feeney's grin widened, and he kept his gaze firmly on Siobhan. "You brought your dragon, and I see you brought your flying machine as well."

Siobhan let out a yelp of offense and stepped away from the wing to glare at Feeney.

Caelian had a hard time not laughing. He had enough things to worry him already without turning Siobhan against him, but it was excessively diverting to watch Feeney and Siobhan together.

"I would think you'd take the characterization of you as a dragon favorably, Lady Siobhan," Feeney said, sauntering closer to her. "Dragons are such formidable creatures."

Siobhan planted her hands on her hips and moved closer to him, her eyes narrowed. "I've no need to be called a dragon to be formidable, Mr. Feeney. As I'm certain you know, women are far more fearsome creatures than dragons under any circumstances. Though I doubt any woman would lower herself to know you."

Feeney looked as though Christmas had come early. "On the contrary, Lady Siobhan," he said. "I have known a great many women, and they have lowered themselves eagerly."

Siobhan let out a shriek of offense, her face turning a bright shade of red. Caelian had an even harder time not laughing, despite the wickedness of Feeney's taunt. He had no doubt that Feeney was a first-rate rake, or that Siobhan was only pretending to be offended.

"Are you going to start the competition soon?" Caelian's cousin Marie called from one of the open carriages that had been parked at the bottom of the slope. She bounced her infant son in her arms, and he seemed to be fussing.

"In just a moment," Caelian called back. "As soon as Erica arrives,"

he added in a low murmur, glancing back to the house.

He was beginning to worry. When they'd parted the evening before, he'd thought that the two of them were on solid ground. The entire meeting had been awkward and uncomfortable, but mostly because of Rev. Joyce's peevishness. Caelian hadn't had any indication that Erica was upset with him, or that she would refuse to participate in the flying contest because of it.

"She isn't angry with you," Feeney confirmed, guessing his thoughts, as he moved to stand by Caelian's side. "Her father was, but at no point did I have the feeling that Miss Joyce herself was cross."

"Something isn't right, though," Caelian insisted in a mumble. He glanced to Feeney, then back over his shoulder at the flying machines —which stood side by side at the top of the hill, just waiting to be tested. He glanced back to Feeney. "I'll confess, Erica was to be the dragon's pilot in today's contest."

Feeney's brow shot up. "Miss Joyce can fly?"

The question struck Caelian as funny. "She is a perfect angel, after all," he said.

No sooner had he finished speaking when one of the upstairs windows in the vicarage opened. A moment later, Erica climbed out to straddle the windowsill. She was wearing the trousers she usually wore when flying the dragon, but that wasn't what had Caelian's smile dropping in alarm.

"What is she doing?" he asked aloud, darting forward. "She could fall and break her neck."

Feeney ran with him as he made his way down the hill toward the vicarage. The crowd of people who had spread out across the hillside and the field turned to see what was the matter. They all gasped and murmured as Erica threw her other leg out the window, then lowered herself slowly, until she hung from the edge of her window. It was still a drop of several feet once she was stretched to her full length, but she let go all the same, spilling to the ground.

"Erica!" Caelian called out, doubling his pace as he and Feeney raced toward the house.

By the time they reached her, Erica had pushed herself to her feet and was brushing herself off. "I am well," she said breathlessly, then laughed unsteadily. "I tried everything I could think of before attempting to flee through the window," she explained. "I tried picking the lock, breaking the hinges of the door, breaking the door itself, but it's surprisingly well made."

Caelian was close enough to clasp his hands around her arms and gape at her to make certain she was truly well. "What do you mean, my love?" he asked, smoothing a hand over her head to reassure himself that there was no damage.

Erica let out a huff. “My father locked me in my room,” she said. “The reason for his behavior at the tea yesterday is because he discovered a letter I was in the process of writing to my pen friend in America all about how we—” she paused, peeking sheepishly at Feeney, who stood a respectful distance to the side, looking concerned for Erica’s welfare. Erica glanced back to Caelian. “He found out, and he was displeased, to say the least.”

“He would be,” Caelian sighed, cupping her face in his hands. “It is all my fault. If I hadn’t been so reticent—”

“Reticent?” Erica interrupted, then laughed. “In what way have any of your actions been reticent.” The saucy look she sent him had Caelian’s heart soaring.

He grinned guiltily at her. “I came here yesterday evening to ask your father for your hand in marriage,” he confessed. “But I backed down from my mission over the shock of seeing you and Feeney together, and because of your father’s irate reaction to me.”

“Then I am truly sorry that I accepted Rev. Joyce’s invitation at all,” Feeney said from the side.

Erica’s face lit up at Caelian’s confession. He wasn’t certain she had even heard Feeney as she smiled at him. “You truly intended to ask for my hand?” She blinked rapidly, as though fighting back tears.

“Yes, my darling,” Caelian said from his heart. “I only regret that I didn’t follow through with my plan.”

“Oh, Caelian,” Erica said, her voice tender and sweet. “I’m not certain my father would have accepted your proposal last night. He had many things to tell me about the past and about my mother, things I didn’t know, so he might have been against the idea. But I am all for it. I love—”

“Are we going to have a flying competition or not?” one of the spectators who had stormed over to the house to see what the delay was called out. He threw out his arms, as if the romantic scene unfolding under Erica’s window was interfering with his plans.

Caelian wanted to tell the man off, but Erica laughed. “The contest will commence immediately,” she called back.

She took Caelian’s hand and tugged him away from the house and into the field. Her eyes sparkled with eagerness as Feeney fell into step with them.

“I do apologize, Mr. Feeney,” she said, practically bouncing as she walked, “but Caelian and I are going to win this contest.”

“And you’re certain of that?” Feeney laughed.

“There is only one thing in my life I have been more certain of,” Erica said, glancing to Caelian with a glow that could have lit the night sky in winter.

Caelian had never been so happy in his life. Strange though it

seemed, after everything that had transpired in the last day, his original plan to win the flying competition then drop to one knee to propose marriage to Erica was still in place. And with so many people there to witness it, he was certain that Rev. Joyce would be forced to approve. It pained him a little to think of manipulating the man into giving him his daughter's hand, but Caelian would make Erica the happiest woman in the world as a means of making amends.

"Are we ready to start the competition?" Avery asked once Caelian, Erica, and Feeney returned to the top of the hill.

"Your audience is ready for a show," Benedict added. "I think half the town is down there."

"We're ready," Erica said, marching boldly up to the center of the dragon and taking the goggles from the handlebars.

Avery and Benedict exchanged a wide-eyed look. "Is Miss Joyce flying the dragon today?" Avery asked.

"She is," Caelian announced proudly. "She is the perfect pilot, for my dragon and for my life."

The two men laughed and shrugged, seeming to accept the unusual turn of events.

Siobhan smiled proudly at Erica, perhaps a little envious that she would defy tradition and society so publicly. "Good for you, Miss Joyce," she said.

Feeney had moved to his flying machine and put on his goggles, but he stepped back over to where Caelian had moved out of the way of his dragon while Erica climbed onto the bicycle. Feeney's eyes were only for Siobhan. "What do you say to an extra wager in this competition, Dervock?" he asked.

Caelian glanced to him in question. "What sort of extra wager?"

Feeney grinned from ear to ear. "If I win, you give me your sister's hand in marriage."

Caelian was so shocked by the suggestion that he laughed. But at the same time, it was a brilliant plan. Feeney and Siobhan would be perfect for each other. Caelian glanced to his sister, then back to Feeney, then said, "You're on."

"What?" Siobhan yelped in protest. "I am not some sort of prize to be bargained for."

"Do you have so little faith in my skills that you think I will lose this contest, sister?" Caelian pretended to be offended.

Siobhan snapped her mouth shut and glared at him, then at Feeney. Her eyes narrowed even thinner as she stared at who she thought of as the enemy. "I believe that Mr. Feeney's skills are subpar. Does that count?"

"I can assure you, Lady Siobhan," Feeney said in a sultry, flirtatious voice, "my skills are second to none."

Siobhan's face flared pink. She turned to Caelian. "You had better win this competition, brother," she said. "I have no intention of letting you hand me over to a cretin like that."

Caelian laughed again. "You've no need to worry," he said. He and Erica were certain to win, but once they did, Caelian was convinced he needed to find a way to pair Siobhan and Feeney regardless.

"Let the competition begin," Feeney said, adjusting his goggles, then striding back to his flying machine.

"He won't win," Erica called to Siobhan, gripping the handlebars of the bicycle with relish. "You are in no danger. Nothing can stop me from soaring today."

Caelian smiled at her, his heart filled to bursting. "You will win this, my love, I know it."

"I'm ready when you are," Feeney called from the center of his craft. "Perhaps Lady Siobhan could do us the honor of waving a handkerchief to signal the beginning of the race," he went on. "Or, if she doesn't have a handkerchief, her drawers will do."

Siobhan growled at him and made a rude gesture that Caelian didn't even know she knew.

That seemed to serve as the signal to start, however. Erica laughed and pushed the pedals into motion. As the contest wasn't about speed, but rather about distance traveled and how long the crafts each stayed in the air, Caelian grabbed hold of the tail of the dragon and pushed to help Erica into motion. Feeney had an assistant to do the same for him, and with a swell of applause from the crowd watching, both crafts moved forward.

It was a magnificent and tense moment. The flying machines started down the hill, and once they'd picked up enough speed, both lifted off the ground, soaring several feet above the grass as the onlookers gasped and cheered. Caelian's heart squeezed in his chest as Erica managed to angle the dragon so that it soared higher than it ever had before, rising several feet above Feeney's craft. By the look of things, Erica was about to fly the dragon farther than it had ever gone before.

Until Rev. Joyce's cry of, "Erica! What are you doing?" cut through the cheering of the crowd. The man had just driven his buggy up to the edge of the crowed, Lady Coyle with him, and he stood, glaring at Erica in the dragon as she spotted him.

Erica must have seen him, and as a result, she must have lost her concentration. As if a spell had been broken, the dragon pitched to the side. As soon as the angle of the wings that was required for lift was disturbed, the entire craft dropped to the ground like a stone, cracking and splintering with a deafening sound as it crashed.

Chapter 12

Everything went wrong from the moment Erica heard her father call out her name. She gasped and flinched, twisting the handlebars of the bicycle to one side when she did. The bicycle did not control the dragon when it was in flight in any way, but jerking the bicycle, in combination with the way she turned to try to spot her father in the crowd of people who had come to watch the contest, instantly redistributed the weight and balance of the craft. Without everything perfectly aligned, the wings failed to maintain loft, and the entire machine suddenly plopped to the ground as though it were a rock.

Erica braced herself for the impact. Watching the ground speed up toward her filled her with a sick feeling. She barely had time to raise her arms to protect her head and thank God that she wasn't any higher above the ground than her second-story bedroom window before every bone in her body was jarred and she was thrown clear off of the bicycle seat as the dragon crashed and splintered around her.

For a moment, everything went black. Pain radiated through her, especially her left leg and her right arm where she'd shielded her head. She was too stunned to do anything but lie where she was, some sort of rushing in her ears, unable to move. She heard a few more cracks around her and some sort of a thump far ahead of her at first, then gradually the sound of screams and shouting sailed toward her, as though from the end of a tunnel.

From there, everything began to rush back into focus. Her body ached, but she could move—although when she tried, she realized her leg was pinned under something and other bits of debris had fallen across her back. Still, she tried to wriggle away from the wreck of the dragon.

"Get in there and help her," a woman's voice shouted.

"No, the contraption might fall to pieces around her," a male voice countered.

"You can't just leave her in there like that," another woman protested.

"Look, she's moving. She's not dead," a boy called out.

"Erica? Oh, my darling Erica!" That voice was her father's, and it

filled Erica with a torrent of conflicting emotions. She wanted her father's comfort, but she also wanted to rail at him for calling out to her and disrupting her focus. She would have beat Mr. Feeney handily if he hadn't shouted at her.

As if her thoughts had drawn the man to her, she heard Mr. Feeney call out, "Stand back. Keep away from the craft." And then, "Dervock, she's alive, but she appears hurt. We can get in there and pull her to safety."

"Get out of my way," Caelian called out, more desperation in his voice than Erica had ever heard.

"Caelian?" She lifted her head—with some difficulty, as a part of the wing had fallen over it—and searched for him. "Caelian?" The wreck of the dragon looked like a cage around her.

"Erica!" he called in return, pushing aside bits of the broken glider.

He slowed his progress through the wreckage when a loud snap sounded and another bit of the dragon collapsed.

"Whoa! Careful there," Mr. Feeney shouted. "We need to lift the wreckage so you can crawl in and carry Miss Joyce to safety."

Erica's senses had fully returned as Lord Carnlough and Lord Boleran and a few others who had watched the contest rushed in to hold up pieces of the flying machine. It struck Erica that she was exceedingly lucky that the craft had been built to be lightweight. Anything heavier and she might have been crushed under the weight of the materials as well as rattled by the impact of the crash. As it was, as soon as she felt the weight lifted off her leg, and as soon as she had enough room to crawl, she tore off her goggles and left them in the grass, then pushed herself forward.

She only made it a few feet before Caelian grabbed her around the middle and tugged her all the way out from under the ruined dragon. He didn't stop there. He pulled her several yards into the clear and clasped his arms around her in a heartfelt embrace.

"Are you alright?" he asked, panting with fear. "Are you hurt in any way? How does your leg feel? How bad was the impact?"

"I…I think I'm alright," Erica said, still stunned, but with a better sense of her body. She would be bruised for days, and she might have twisted her ankle, but it could have been so much worse than it had been. "Let me try to stand up and see what happens."

"Of course." Caelian scrambled to his feet, bringing her with him.

Erica deliberately put weight on her left leg, wincing at the shoot of pain that traveled up to her hip. "At least it's not broken," she said. She didn't think anything was broken. Except for the dragon. She turned a mournful eye on the wreck of Caelian's once-beautiful flying machine. It looked like little more than a pile of kindling and canvas with a twisted bicycle in the middle now. "I'm so sorry, Caelian," she

said, a wave of delayed emotion hitting her as she stared at the wreck and realized how much worse things could have been. “I broke your flying machine.” She burst into tears and started shaking.

“No, my darling, it was not your fault,” Caelian said, folding her in his arms. “These things happen. They’ve been happening with everyone who is attempting to fly. This was not your doing.” He hugged her close, kissed the top of her head, and smoothed her hair.

“Erica! Erica, my dear, are you well?” her father gasped, pushing through the crowd that had formed around Erica and Caelian to get to her.

Erica lifted her head from Caelian’s shoulder and glanced at her father. His face was white and his eyes were wide with fear. “I’m well, Papa,” she said in a weak voice. She couldn’t think of anything else to say to him.

Her father’s fear transformed into anger in a heartbeat. “What in heaven’s name were you doing in that contraption?” he demanded. “You could have been killed.” He glanced to Caelian, as though it were his fault.

“I was not killed, Papa,” Erica insisted, pushing away from Caelian so that she could stand on her own two feet—even though she didn’t actually want to leave the comfort of Caelian’s arms. “I have been flying Caelian’s flying machine all week, and until you called out and distracted me, I was quite good at it.”

Her father snapped his mouth shut and flinched, though Erica couldn’t tell whether he was offended by her accusation or felt guilty because of it. “You should not have been associating with Lord Dervock in such a manner,” he said, though the argument felt stale.

“Erica is a natural pilot,” Caelian defended her, standing straight and tall at her side. “She has the intelligence and the skill to be one of the great pioneers of flight. I have been honored to have her assistance in this competition, and I fully intend to continue to consult with her about all future aircrafts.”

“Hear, hear,” Mr. Feeney spoke up from somewhere just behind them, surprising Erica, but delighting her as well.

“You will do no such thing,” Erica’s father protested. “I have just come from speaking with Lady Coyle, and we have decided that you will marry Mr. O’Donnell, the apothecary.”

“She will do no such thing,” Caelian said with a fierce protectiveness, sliding his arm around Erica’s waist. “Erica will marry me, and she’ll do it as soon as you read the banns, starting tomorrow.”

Erica’s heart soared higher than she ever had in the dragon, and she glanced up at Caelian with a look of surprise and delight.

But before she could say anything, her father sputtered, “Truly?” He gaped at Caelian, as though he couldn’t quite figure out what to

make of the man.

"Absolutely," Caelian said. He glanced to Erica, and his entire face lit up in a smile. "I love your daughter, sir. I have loved her from the moment I laid eyes on her, but that love has only grown as we have come to know each other better. I have never been so impressed with anyone in my life as I am with her."

"You truly mean that?" Erica's father blinked in shock. "You weren't just…toying with her?"

"Yes, I truly love her," Caelian said, shifting from smiling at Erica to frowning at her father. "Why would you doubt for a moment that I love her?"

Her father continued to look flabbergasted. "You are a viscount," he said. "She is but the daughter of a vicar."

"It matters not to me." Caelian smiled at Erica again. "I love her, and I will marry her." He glanced back to her father. "I had come here last night to ask for her hand, but I failed to ask because I was made to doubt my love. But I was wrong to let a little hostility get in the way of the one thing that I am more certain of than anything in my life." He smiled at Erica once more.

"You…you wish to marry my Erica in spite of her station?" her father asked, seeming to have a difficult time grasping the concept.

"He said he did, didn't he?" Mr. Feeney said, stepping forward.

"I…." Erica's father continued to gape as he glanced between Erica and Caelian. Then he let out a breath and dropped his shoulders. "If you truly wish to marry her, then who am I to deny you?"

Erica's heart leapt for joy. "Oh, Papa, thank you," she said, stepping away from Caelian and moving to throw her arms around her father. The simple movement reminded her of all her bruises and strains, but a little pain was worth it for the gift her father had given her.

"I'll start reading the banns tomorrow," her father said, brightening considerably.

"And while you're at it," Mr. Feeney said, "you might as well go ahead and read the banns for me and Lady Siobhan as well."

The crowd of onlookers gasped.

"I beg your pardon?" Lady Siobhan demanded, shoving her way through the onlookers to stand face to face with Mr. Feeney, glaring at him.

Mr. Feeney shrugged, though is eyes blazed with humor and affection. "I won the contest, after all," he said. "And the wager was that if I won, I would be rewarded with your hand in marriage."

"That is entirely unfair," Lady Siobhan protested. "The contest was nullified when the dragon crashed."

"Was it?" Mr. Feeney asked, a clever grin spreading across his face.

“That wasn’t part of the terms. My flying machine traveled a farther distance and stayed aloft longer. Those were the only conditions that I was aware of.”

“Those were the conditions of the contest, Siobhan,” Caelian said. He was trying and failing to hide a teasing grin.

“I did not agree to this,” Lady Siobhan growled.

“Actually, my sweetling, you did,” Mr. Feeney said with a laugh.

“You did,” Caelian agreed.

Erica couldn’t help herself. “Actually, Lady Siobhan, you did,” she said, grinning along with Caelian.

“We all heard you,” Lord Carnlough said. He shrugged. “We O’Sheas are forever getting ourselves into trouble like this,” he explained to the crowd.

Several people in the crowd laughed, and someone called out, “We all heard you, Lady Siobhan. You agreed to marry Mr. Feeney if he won.”

A chorus of agreement rose up in the wake of that statement. Lady Siobhan looked mutinous. She let out a loud and undignified sound of frustration. “You will not get away with this, Mr. Feeney,” she said, pointing a finger at the man, scowling, then turning to push her way through the crowd and flee.

“So I will be reading two sets of banns beginning tomorrow?” Erica’s father asked.

“You will,” Caelian confirmed, holding out a hand to Erica, then pulling her back into his arms once she took it. “And you will be making at least two of us the happiest people in Ireland when you do.”

THE BANNS WERE INDEED READ the next day, both for Erica and Caelian and Mr. Feeney and Lady Siobhan. They were read the Sunday after that, and the third Sunday as well. Erica would have found it curious that Lady Siobhan didn’t protest the reading of the banns for her and Mr. Feeney, but she was too busy planning her and Caelian’s wedding for the following Sunday.

She only wanted a small wedding, just their friends and close family, and despite being a viscount and a man of renown, Caelian was amenable to that. Since Erica didn’t have a sister and hadn’t made many friends in Ireland yet—and since, even though she’d sent a letter to Ellen the Monday after the contest, there was no way Ellen could have rushed to Ireland for the wedding—she asked Lady Siobhan to be her bridesmaid. It was no surprise that Caelian asked Mr. Feeney to stand up with him after that. Not only did Caelian approve of his sister marrying the man, after the destruction of the dragon, Caelian and Mr. Feeney had decided to form a partnership to work together—

with Erica's help—on future flying machines.

"I believe it will be a beneficial arrangement for all," Mr. Feeney told Erica's father and Lady Coyle as the three of them stood with the two older people in the garden of Caelian's manor house during the reception after what Erica believed was the most beautiful wedding that had ever happened. "With our combined intelligence and experience, we're bound to beat the American and the French teams to the creation of a viable flying machine."

"I suppose," Lady Coyle said, clearly shocked by the whole endeavor. The woman was a bit put out when Erica and Caelian had announced their engagement, but within days, she'd been taking credit for the match all the same. She glanced at Erica with more than a little suspicion. "I'm not certain aeronautics is a proper activity for a lady to involve herself in. And you are a lady now, Lady Dervock," Lady Coyle reminded her.

Erica had to admit she felt a bit of a thrill at her new title. She sent a smile that was almost apologetic to her father, though. Part of her wondered what her mother would have thought of her marrying a nobleman. It felt like a great tragedy that her mother's heartbreak had prevented her from seeing her daughter's triumph. Erica also wondered what her sire's family would think to know that a child of their blood had married so well despite the way they had turned their back on her mother. But after further conversation with her father about what had happened all those years ago, Erica had decided that she did not want to know anything about her sire or his family. Her father was her father, and he would always remain so.

"And now we all turn our attention to your wedding next weekend, Mr. Feeney," Lady Coyle went on with a satisfied smile. "That is a fine match, if I do say so myself."

"It is," Mr. Feeney agreed with a broad grin. He knew as well as Erica and Caelian did that Lady Coyle was taking credit for that match as well. "I should probably find my bride," Mr. Feeney went on. "To make certain she isn't packing a bag and attempting to run away." He winked at Erica—who laughed, even though the joke was at Siobhan's expense—then stepped away from their group.

Before another conversation could begin, Caelian put a hand on the small of Erica's back and said, "If you will excuse me, I have something to discuss with my bride as well."

"Of course," Lady Coyle said, then turned to Erica's father. "Rev. Joyce, perhaps you could help me pick out a suitable lady for poor Mr. O'Donnell, who has felt quite slighted by this whole episode."

Of all things, Erica's father looked flattered. "I would be honored, Lady Coyle."

As the two of them walked off, Caelian steered Erica across the

garden and into the house.

"What do you have to discuss with me?" Erica asked as he hurried her along the hall and up the stairs. Erica had become quite familiar with Caelian's house in the past few weeks as she'd slowly moved her belongings into it and helped Caelian to make a few additional purchases of furniture and decorations so that she could feel like it was her own, so she knew he was drawing her along to their bedroom.

"I wanted to discuss flying with you," he said once they were secreted away in the bedroom on their own.

Without waiting for her reply, he swept Erica into his arms and kissed her thoroughly. Erica smiled at his kiss, which served to part her lips so that Caelian could kiss her even deeper. She loved every moment of it and threw her arms around his shoulders to pull him even closer.

"I love you, you know," Caelian said, radiating joy. "I love everything about you."

"And I love everything about you," Erica replied, pressing into him to kiss him again. Their kiss instantly turned passionate, which made her giggle paradoxically. "This does rather feel like flying," she said with a sigh, gazing lovingly up at Caelian.

"You make my heart take wing," he said, kissed her quickly, then added, "And I've waited long enough for this moment and another taste of the bliss I've been dreaming of for weeks now."

Erica giggled even louder and immediately started on the buttons of his jacket. "I thought I would have to wait until tonight and that the wait would be interminable," she told him with a saucy look. "We are terribly wicked to sneak away from our wedding guests for this reason," she added as she helped him to push his jacket off his shoulders, letting it drop to the floor.

"We are not the first, nor do I believe we will be the last, newly married couple to be this wicked," he said in a tempting voice.

"Certainly not," Erica said.

That was the last coherent thought she was able to form as they returned to kissing while simultaneously trying to undress each other. The practicalities of removing wedding clothes superseded passion for a moment as Caelian lovingly helped her out of her fine, lace gown, but once all of their clothes had been cast aside, they tumbled into bed together.

"Do you know," Erica said as Caelian rolled her to her back and proceeded to lavish every inch of her skin that he could find with kisses, "I'm rather glad we behaved so wickedly all those weeks ago under the dragon."

"You are?" Caelian asked, lifting his head from where he had just begun to kiss and caress one of her breasts.

Erica's heart raced, and she nearly ordered him back to his work instead of finishing her thought. "Yes," she said. "This way, I don't have to worry about what might happen or how it might feel. I know exactly what will happen, and I know that it will feel divine." She sighed and stretched, which only encouraged Caelian to continue his work.

He closed his mouth over her nipple so that he could lick and suckle her. Erica sighed and moaned with pleasure and satisfaction. She could easily see how the O'Shea family and her mother could give up stoic respectability for pleasure like this. In fact, she didn't know how more women weren't tempted into wickedness. She writhed and sighed as Caelian worshiped her body with his mouth, threading her fingers through his hair and responding to his every touch with joy and enthusiasm.

"You really are the most wonderful person I've ever met," Caelian growled as he kissed his way down her belly, circling her navel with his tongue as he went. "I don't think I'll ever get enough of you."

"Nor I you," Erica sighed.

She would have said more, but Caelian slipped his hands under her thighs and moved them apart, exposing her completely to him. A shiver of excitement and the sense that everything he was doing was deliciously naughty had Erica pulsing with need. And that was before Caelian leaned in to taste her. She gasped at the sensations his lips and tongue sent through the most intimate parts of her. Everything he did made her feel as though she were on fire and about to explode into pure light. The way he touched her was like heaven. It was very much like soaring through the skies, sunlight infusing her.

"Yes," she panted as he drew his tongue over her clitoris while teasing the part of her that was so wet for him with his fingers. "Oh, yes."

Words failed her, and she let out a moan of delight as her body throbbed with orgasm. It filled every part of her with light, and she arched into him, letting herself go completely with pure bliss and love.

"You are magnificent," Caelian panted, quickly sliding up her body and joining with her while she was still throbbing.

It felt so perfect to have him lodged tightly inside of her that she let out another deep moan of pleasure and bore into him. He answered her sounds with a passionate groan of his own, holding himself inside of her as her body finished contracting around him. That in itself was lovely, but everything reached for a whole new level of bliss when he began to move.

She clasped her arms and legs around him, caught up in the feeling of Caelian taking his pleasure from her while she still felt so alive and

wonderful. They gave and took from each other, each of them finding their own enjoyment, but experiencing it together, as though their souls were entwined. She loved everything about it, from the way it felt to be invaded and stretched by her husband to the love that surrounded them. And when Caelian's movements and sounds of passion grew pitched right before he let out a heavy breath and spilled himself inside of her, she loved the possibility that the two of them could create new life together. They could create so many things together.

"Our future is going to be wonderful," she panted as the two of them sprawled on the bed in a messy pile of arms and legs, completely sated. "Our life together is going to be so happy."

"It will be if I have anything to say about it," Caelian told her with a brilliant, sated smile. "Because I love you. I love you so much there aren't words."

"And I love you too," Erica said, feeling as though everything was completely perfect.

Epilogue

Siobhan glanced out at the guests attending the reception for Caelian and Erica with a frown, her arms crossed. It wasn't that she had anything against a garden party on the property of her family's manor house. She wasn't against marriage in general, or her brother's marriage in particular. She liked all of her cousins and their family friends well enough, and she really was fond of Rev. Joyce, in spite of the problems he'd caused for Caelian and Erica. Once Siobhan had learned the whole story of why her father had caused trouble straight from Erica, she'd forgiven him for his meddling.

What put the frown on Siobhan's face and kept it there was frustration—frustration that was directed at herself. If everything continued on the way it was supposed to, in one week's time they would all be having a similar party to celebrate another wedding. Her wedding. Her wedding with Rory Feeney. And God help her, she didn't have the first clue how she felt about that. She'd been tricked into marriage, that much was certain, but whether she wanted to refuse to go through with it or whether she wanted to charge ahead so that Feeney was stuck with her, she couldn't decide. There were definite benefits to marrying a man out of spite, particularly a man as wealthy as Rory Feeney.

"There you are," the devil in question said, stepping up onto the terrace where Siobhan stood, watching everyone else enjoying themselves. "And looking as pretty as a daisy, I might add."

Siobhan turned her glowering look on her betrothed. "What business is it of yours how I look, sir?" she snapped.

Feeney looked as though she'd given him the most glowing of compliments. "You are my bride," he said with an impish smile. "It is every bit my business that you look as lovely as a summer's day."

Siobhan laughed and turned away from him. "I am not yours to own, like another cannery or a prize horse."

"Of course not," he said, sidling even closer to her. "You are much more precious than that."

Siobhan arched one eyebrow and stared up at him. "So you admit that you only want to marry me to add to your collection of prized

possessions?" she asked, indignant.

"Naturally," Feeney said with a shrug, his grin even more teasing. "I have more money than I'll ever be able to spend, I am well-regarded in all of the northern part of Ireland and abroad, and all I need now to rise to the very top of society is to marry into the aristocracy."

Siobhan couldn't tell if he was serious or joking, but either way, his comments stung. She stood straighter, turning to face him fully. "That's all I am to you?" she demanded. "A means to an end?"

"Do you wish to be more?" he asked, eyes blazing with challenge.

Siobhan felt herself flush and stood even straighter. "I have no wish to be married off to a man in the same way that a silver cup is handed over as a prize."

"Then you should have refused the wager when it was made," he said, moving closer to her still. "You should have protested when the banns were read."

"I—" As much as she wanted to argue, Siobhan didn't know what to say.

Feeney moved so close that she could smell the scent of his shaving soap and feel the heat of his body. "You should have put a stop to things right at the beginning," he murmured closer to her ear, "but you didn't. I wonder why."

He leaned in and kissed the top of her jaw, right next to her ear, then nipped her earlobe. It was the strangest and most erotic thing a man had ever done to her, and despite her anger, a shiver passed through her. Her traitorous body was disappointed when he moved away from her.

"It's too late now, Lady Siobhan," Feeney told her as he stepped back, his eyes sparkling with mirth and desire. "You're stuck with me. You're trapped. You cannot back out of this marriage now."

He was only saying those things to goad her, but it worked. At least, Siobhan thought it worked. She was furious and she hated the man. So why was she trembling with the pent-up need to feel his lips against hers?

"Go away," she told him, her voice gruff and her face hot.

The devil Feeney laughed. "I will call on you later this week so that we can make arrangements for our own happy day. Until then, enjoy the rest of your brother's reception, my sweet."

Siobhan opened her mouth to tell the man off, but nothing came out. He tipped his hat to her, then turned to stride off, as if he owned the world. She hated it, hated him.

So why did her heart thunder against her ribs as though it would break free and chase after him?

No, she thought, turning away and marching to the table of refreshments to down a glass of punch, she would not let Rory Feeney

get the best of her. She would jilt him at the altar and leave him humiliated. That was exactly what she wanted to do.

Wasn't it?

I HOPE you have enjoyed Erica and Caelian's story! The early days of flight were truly fascinating. Everyone knows that the Wright brothers were the first to be credited with the first flight at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina in 1903, but a lot of work over a great many decades preceded that flight. As early as the 1860s, men were testing gliders and other flying contraptions, learning more and more about the principles that would develop into the science behind flight. By the late 1880s, when Caelian and Rory Feeney were building and testing their machines, men all over the world were creating similar craft and comparing their finds. It took a lot of failures—and a lot of crashes, and even a few deaths—before everything came together for the Wright brothers. I'd like to think that in the world created in my books, Caelian, Rory, and Erica beat everyone else to the punch and came up with the first viable airplane.

BUT WHAT ABOUT Rory and Lady Siobhan? Will they really go through with a marriage that came about as a result of a wager? And if Lady Siobhan goes through with it, will it be as a way to get revenge on Rory and make his life miserable, or is she actually developing feelings for him? And is Rory truly the rogue he likes to pretend to be, or is there much more to him than meets the eye? Find out next in *Give Your Heart a Rake*…. Keep clicking to get started on Chapter One!

AND IF YOU'D like to find out more about the town of Haskell, Wyoming, where Erica's pen friend, Ellen Garrett (who, yes, is the sister of my heroine, Lenore Garrett, from the book *Scandal Meets Its Match*, part of the *May Flowers* series), be sure to check out my steamy Historical Western Series, *The Brides of Paradise Ranch*! It begins with *His Perfect Bride*…and you might just get a glimpse of Ellen when she was a baby in that book.

IF YOU ENJOYED this book and would like to hear more from me, please sign up for my newsletter! When you sign up, you'll get a free, full-length novella, *A Passionate Deception*. Victorian identity theft has never been so exciting in this story of hope, tricks, and starting over. Part of my West Meets East series, *A Passionate Deception* can be read

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And now, get started on *Give Your Heart a Rake*…

Ballymena, Ireland – July, 1889

THERE WAS no way in hell that she was going to go through with it. Lady Siobhan O'Shea stormed down the bustling main thoroughfare of Ballymena, her face set in a scowl, her closed parasol gripped in one hand and her other hand balled into a fist. She might have been concerned about the poor citizens of Ballymena who were forced to jump out of her way or who ducked into shops as she passed to avoid her wrath, but too many things were at stake for her to mind the way that others saw her. If she didn't do something about the mess her brother, Lord Caelian O'Shea, had landed her in, people would think a great many other unkind things about her.

Because there was no possible way that Siobhan would let herself forevermore be known at the lady who was forced to marry beneath her because her brother had lost her hand in marriage in a bet.

She turned the corner from the High Street onto William Street and nearly ran headlong into a maid who seemed to be setting out on errands of one sort or another. Siobhan's worst fears seemed to be confirmed when the maid gasped, "Oh!" then immediately blurted, "You're the one who's marrying Mr. Feeney because of the bet!"

Frustration mingled with despair in Siobhan's chest, showing itself in a peevish scowl, which she turned on the maid. "I am Lady Siobhan O'Shea," she told the girl, tilting her chin up. "I am my own woman, no matter what lies you might have heard to the contrary."

The maid blushed and bobbed an embarrassed—and slightly terrified—curtsey, they rushed away on her errands.

Siobhan let out a sigh as soon as the girl was gone, her shoulders drooping slightly. That was exactly the sort of encounter that Caelian had doomed her to for the rest of her life. She wouldn't have minded so much if she'd earned a salacious reputation for herself, but if even

maids felt they could accost her on the street to remind her that she was little more than a bargaining chip in the game of men, that truly was a tragedy.

It was a tragedy that she would not stand for. Gathering her courage, Siobhan squared her shoulders and walked on, heading for the third house on the right along William Street. She would not marry Rory Feeney, no matter what bets had been made and no matter what her brother wanted. Caelian could see the whole thing as a joke all he liked, but marriage was no laughing matter.

Siobhan marched right up to the front steps of Feeney's house and rapped on the door with the handle of her parasol. She wasn't afraid of Rory Feeney. Not one whit. The man might have been tall with broad shoulders and a rakish smile, but she had never been intimidated by size. He might have been as handsome as the devil, with dark hair, flashing blue eyes, and a hint of ruggedness that all of his money hadn't been able to divest him of, but she wasn't the sort of woman to swoon over a pretty face. Neither was she the sort of woman to have her head turned by wealth. Feeney was a self-made man—born in poverty, but determined enough to work his way up to owning the largest cannery in the north of Ireland—but riches and a compelling story wouldn't turn Siobhan's head. Feeney was a bounder and a cad. He was a rake of the lowest sort who—

A liveried butler with impeccable manners opened the door in the middle of her thought, revealing the front hall of a magnificently-appointed townhouse. "May I help you?" the butler asked in a warm and helpful voice.

Siobhan tried to ignore the hints of mahogany furnishings, marble flooring, and fine artwork she spotted in the hall behind the butler. She forced herself not to pay any attention to the delicious scent that wafted out of the house—something like rich wood and delicate flowers combined with the faintest hint of something delectable from the kitchens. She cleared her throat, tilted her chin up, and said, "I am here to see Mr. Feeney."

"Very good, Lady Siobhan," the butler said with a smile and a slight bow, stepping aside. "Please, do come in."

A bit of Siobhan's bullishness disappeared at the butler's kind invitation, and the fact that he knew who she was. She kept her shoulders squared and her manner confident as she stepped into the foyer of the magnificent house, but she smiled at the butler. The man was merely doing his job, and doing it well.

"If you would be so kind as to wait here, my lady," the butler said, "I will inform Mr. Feeney of your arrival."

"Thank you," Siobhan said, nodding as the man turned to walk down the hall in search of Feeney.

Siobhan watched him, noting that the hall was surprisingly long with quite a few doorways off of it. That indicated that the house was far larger than it seemed from the outside. The grand staircase that took up a fair portion of the front hall was large as well and made of beautifully-polished wood. Siobhan took a few steps forward so that she could peer into the parlors on either side of the front hall. Both seemed to be expertly decorated, with generous amounts of fine furniture, fresh flowers, and art. There were few portraits among the art—which was likely due to the fact that Feeney didn't have the sort of ancestors who would have commissioned portraits—but Siobhan was certain she spotted more than one work by Monet, Renoir, and perhaps even Cassatt, she would need to examine it more closely to be certain. The front hallway was also home to a stunning Carrara marble sculpture of a woman draped in a thin grown. The woman wore a cheeky look that had Siobhan's back up all over again. Of course Rory Feeney would acquire a bit of art like that, the wretched man.

Although he did have excellent taste.

"Lady Siobhan, what a pleasure to see you this morning," Feeney said as he stepped out of a room at the far end of the hall and started toward Siobhan, shaking her out of her thoughts. "I am pleased that you have accepted one of my numerous invitations to call at last, seeing as we're to be married in six days." He added the last bit in a lower, teasing voice, his blue eyes glittering with mirth as he did.

For a moment, Siobhan found it hard to breathe. She felt overwarm as well. Feeney would do well to chastise his staff about keeping his home at a comfortable temperature and removing the dust from the air before it choked someone.

"I have not come to pay a social call, sir," she snapped at him, standing as rigidly as she could. "And we are not to be married in six days."

"Do you wish to marry me today, then?" he asked, more mischief in his eyes. He held out a hand to the parlor that contained the Cassatt, inviting Siobhan to move their encounter into that room. "The banns have already been read. We could proceed at any time."

Siobhan made a sound of derision and followed the infuriating man into the parlor. "No, sir, I did not come to move up the date of our wedding. I have come to tell you that I have no intention of marrying you at all."

"Is that so?" As soon as they were comfortably in the room and Feeney gestured to a lovely, soft chair for Siobhan to sit in, he glanced back to the door, where the butler was now standing. "Killian, would you be so kind as to send up tea? I believe Mrs. Murphy was baking earlier, and Lady Siobhan might be interested in her skills."

"Yes, sir," the butler, Killian, said with a smile and a nod before

turning to go.

"How do you feel about croissants, Siobhan?" Feeney asked, taking a seat on the armchair next to Siobhan's.

"Do not, sir, address me by my given name," she told him with a narrow-eyed look in return. "I have not given you leave to do so."

"But Siobhan, by this time next week, we will be man and wife," Feeney argued, grinning impishly at her. "It would hardly do for me to be so formal with you, especially after the wedding night." He wiggled his eyebrows at her like a cad.

Siobhan growled in impatience. "You are the most infuriating man ever," she told him. "You are cheeky and arrogant, you seem to think the entire world is some sort of game, and I will not marry you simply because my brother lost a wager."

"You are correct," he said, stunning Siobhan into confusion. "I am cheeky and arrogant, and I do see the world, and life in general, as a game. It is a game I am winning, though." He added a particularly salacious wink to his statement.

"That is all well and good for you, sir," Siobhan went on, battling not to be distracted by the warmth in his smile or the things that his rakish manners hinted at. She wasn't made of stone, after all. She hadn't been made of stone when he'd kissed her at Caelian and Erica's wedding the day before either—and he hadn't even kissed her on her mouth, the snake. She blinked over that rogue thought, then pulled herself together enough to go on with, "I will not be made a laughingstock. I refuse for everyone to know that I am nothing more than a prize to be won in a wager between two silly and foolhardy men."

"You are, indeed, a prize," Feeney said with a careless shrug and a teasing smile, "but not one that holds value because of any wager."

"I—" Siobhan gulped, feeling entirely off-balance because of the potential sweetness of those words. "What do you mean by that, sir?" she snapped, not quite as sharply as she'd intended.

"I simply mean that you, Siobhan O'Shea, are one of a kind," Feeney told her. "You are feisty and clever. You have fire and life in you. Our lives will never contain a dull moment, that much is for certain."

"I…er…you are certain?" Siobhan cursed herself for fumbling along in the face of flattery that she knew she should be fighting. Damn Feeney for being such a honey-tongued charmer.

"More certain than I've ever been of anything," Feeney continued. "All of the sweet-tempered, rosy-cheeked, biddable young women I've had have never interested me for long. I require something with a bit more spice, a bit more flavor, to keep me on my toes." His grin was downright horrid.

Siobhan hated the fact that her breath seemed to catch in her lungs and her heart to run riot in her chest. “And just how many biddable women have you known, sir?” she asked with a frown.

Feeney smiled. “Enough so that I know precisely how I am going to make you sigh and moan and beg me for more, my lady.”

Siobhan’s mouth dropped open. How dare the lout make such wicked suggestions? And what was wrong with his staff that had possessed them with the idea of heating the house to the level of a furnace in the middle of summer?

Siobhan was spared the necessity of fanning herself or replying to Feeney’s cheek when there was a knock at the door. She and Feeney both glanced to the hall, but just as Feeney began to rise from his seat with the intent, Siobhan supposed, of answering his own door, Killian appeared at the entrance to the parlor with a tray of tea things in his arms.

“I beg your pardon, sir,” he said to Feeney as he set the tray down, then hurried back to the foyer to answer the door.

“Tea, my lady?” Feeney offered Siobhan as Killian reached the door.

Siobhan glanced briefly at the tray and its contents—an exquisite silver tea service with delicate, porcelain cups, rich cream and glittering sugar cubes, a plate of buttery croissants that looked as though they’d come straight from Paris, and a selection of stunningly beautiful finger sandwiches made into the shape of summer flowers—briefly, her mouth instantly watering. Her attention was pulled back to the hall when Killian answered the door, though.

“Is Mr. Feeney at home?” a woman’s voice asked.

Instantly, every warm, kind feeling Siobhan had reluctantly developed for Feeney since taking a seat evaporated. It didn’t matter that his house was luxurious and filled with art, or that his cook appeared to be one of the finest in all of northern Ireland, or that all of it could be hers in just six days. She clenched her jaw and narrowed her eyes in suspicion at Feeney, wondering why another woman was calling on him in the middle of a Monday morning.

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Merry Farmer is an award-winning novelist who lives in suburban Philadelphia with her cats, Justine and Peter. She has been writing since she was ten years old and realized one day that she didn't have to wait for the teacher to assign a creative writing project to write something. It was the best day of her life. She then went on to earn not one but two degrees in History so that she would always have something to write about. Her books have reached the Top 100 at Amazon, iBooks, and Barnes & Noble, and have been named finalists in the prestigious RONE and Rom Com Reader's Crown awards.

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